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Sunnyridge

Sunnyridge

(A Story of the Missouri Hills)

by

CLARK DUNCAN

Author of "Light On A Hill"



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SUNNYRIDGE
by CLARK DUNCAN

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DEDICATION

TO

MARY FRANCES PITTMAN DUNCAN

*my mother,
who spent her entire life
in the Missouri hills.*

Sunnyridge

CHAPTER 1

JOSIE was standing on the river bank watching a boat race when a stranger stopped to enjoy the scene with her. He was tall and straight and manly looking. He had black hair, large brown eyes, and a friendly look in his face. His strong body was garbed in hunting clothes; a camera hung from his shoulder.

As the race progressed, Josie observed that the stranger's enthusiasm mounted like a volcano, and he moved over closer, clapped his hands, and shouted: "Look! Look! Here they come!"

The two motor boats dashed past them at break-neck speed, unable to gain a foot of distance on each other.

"That was a close race," the stranger remarked, once the boats were out of sight.

Josie smiled and nodded. She found his gaze disconcerting for she was conscious of her faded old blue slacks and tan shirt. She supposed he was one of the guests at the clubhouse on the hill. She had often had fleeting glimpses of the gay crowd of men and women who came there each year for vacations, and she envied them their lives of ease and comfort. She cherished a secret desire to visit the place and meet some of the people, but according to her Aunt Maria's viewpoint, they were a worthless lot who never worked, and had no use for anyone except their own set.

Quick to detect her shyness, he said, "My name is Farrel McIverson. I'm stopping at the clubhouse."

Josie's aunt had often warned her against visiting with strangers, and she looked at him appraisingly. She liked

his appearance, and his voice dispelled her distrust of him. While he stood staring at her with dull wonderment in his eyes, she fought fiercely with her timidity. She felt that it was her Christian duty to be polite.

"My name is Josie Wilkes, sir. I live right over there at Sunnyridge." She pointed toward a house down the river.

"Sunnyridge? How interesting!" He moved a trifle closer. "I'm a naturalist engaged in research work. I would like to talk to some of you people who have always lived here. May I come over sometime and meet your folks?"

Her answer was blank bewilderment. Josie couldn't help wondering what her Aunt Maria would think about it. She raised stricken blue eyes to his.

"Perhaps you don't like strangers," he said after a moment.

"I'm sure my grandfather will be glad to talk to you, sir," she said. "I'll have to be going, I've been here too long already."

"I trust I'll have the pleasure of meeting you again," he said smiling. "Good-by!"

Josie hurried away more excited than she had ever been. The stranger interested her. There was an indefinable something about him she admired. While she had exchanged only a few words with him, she felt he was a gentleman. Secretly, she hoped this would not be their last meeting.

She wouldn't dare mention meeting the man to her Aunt Maria for she knew it would bring forth bitter denunciations from her. She sometimes wondered if her aunt had ever been a girl; she seemed to understand them so little.

Having been left an orphan at the age of ten, Josie lived with her grandfather. She grew desperately lonely at times and longed for a life that was new and different. She wanted to go places, meet new people, and enjoy life.

She hurried on for she sensed that she had remained by the river longer than she should and would receive a severe scolding when she reached home.

The old house at Sunnyridge was a two-story frame dwelling badly in need of paint. The furnishings inside were old-fashioned and reminiscent of early days.

When Josie entered the house, the stern voice of her aunt demanded: "Where have you been, I'd like to know?"

On account of her aunt's crankiness, Josie was compelled to give an account of every move she made. "I've been down to the river, Aunt Maria," she said sullenly. "I saw a boat race."

Maria Wilkes, her keen gray eyes set far apart in her worn face, bore the look of one who had suffered greatly. Her slender body was swathed in a blue print dress, faded from many washings. Her reddish brown hair, streaked with gray, which she wore in a walnut on top of her head, gave her the mark of a typical country woman. She kept house for her widowed brother and dispensed the hospitality of Sunnyridge with a cold formality which troubled Josie and her grandfather.

"Just idlin' away your time, eh?" she said coldly. "I can always find work to do."

Sensing the fault-finding mood that her aunt was in, Josie hurried into the kitchen.

Maria turned to her brother and said, "What's come over that girl, Josiah? I can't get anything out of her any more. She seems to be daydreaming all the time. I told her to scrub the kitchen this mornin' but she never let on like she heard me. You don't seem to care, though, what she does."

Josiah Wilkes, affectionately known by his neighbors as Pap Wilkes, was one of the oldest residents in Plunkett Valley. He was a thin old man with unkempt gray hair and faded blue eyes. His large bony hands gave evidence of much hard labor.

He turned from his paper and for a moment looked at his sister who was glibly rattling off a list of Josie's failings. "You're all unstrung today, Maria. Leave the girl alone. She's young yet, you know."

Maria's face reddened. "Humph! I wish she'd settle down to somethin'. When I was her age, I was doin' a day's work," she snapped.

Pap's mild eyes became thoughtful. He rustled his paper until he had it upside down. Finally, he laid it aside, removed his glasses, and polished the lens with a large bandanna. "Josie's just at the age, Maria, when she has dreams and fancies; every girl has 'em. She don't think like we do. Try to understand her."

Maria turned on him with a look of mild reproach. "I'll declare, Josiah, you talk plumb funny yourself at times. I suppose it's from you that she gets all her queer notions. Our pap never had much time to indulge us in such foolishness. It kept us plenty busy makin' a livin'," she said with sharp impatience.

Pap crossed his legs, clasped his hands together and said, "I reckon we were too repressed when we were children, Maria. We missed a heap we might have gotten out of life if we had been reared different. I may be wrong but I believe that children should be allowed to develop in their own way without bein' molded. Josie's as sweet a girl as you can find anywhere and it's just natural for her to be that way."

Maria raised her head haughtily. "Oh, I don't know about that, Josiah, you must remember that she ain't a child any more. She's almost a young lady now, but young people, no matter what age, need correctin'; unless they are, they never amount to anything."

"You're a great deal like your father, Maria, he was very strict."

"If you were more strict yourself, it would make it a lot easier for me," Marie retorted.

"A child who has been reared without a mother has it hard enough without making it any worse for her."

Maria smiled, a smile Pap disliked; it was hard and bitter.

"I've tried to be a mother to her, Josiah, and I want her brought up to be a lady if it's at all possible. She's liable to get into trouble gallivantin' around like she is with so many strangers in the neighborhood."

"There's nobody goin' to bother the girl as long as she minds her own business," Pap said firmly. "Don't hold too tight a rein on her. Remember you was young once yourself."

Maira shrugged. "Huh! I wasn't anything like her — I was brought up to work. I'm afraid you'll be sorry some day that you haven't been more strict with her."

Pap lit his pipe and lay back dreamily with his hands clasped behind his head. Soon, his pipe which had gone out, fell from his mouth, scattering ashes on the floor.

Maria's shout woke him. "Look what you're doin' there!" She grabbed the broom and started sweeping up the mess. "You should show a little consideration for the one who does the work around here!"

Pap roused up and stared at his sister with contempt. "It ain't right, Maria, to storm around like you do at times over nothin'. I wish you'd get a grip on yourself."

"You know better than to doze off with your pipe in your mouth," she said scornfully. "You're goin' to be late with your milkin'."

An hour later, Pap came in with the milk pails well filled, and a dozen kittens trailing him. They kept up a continual, "*M-e-o-w, m-e-o-w!*"

Josie started to empty the milk into the separator when she was stopped by her aunt.

"Josephine Wilkes! Haven't I told you a million times to let me do that?" Maria wailed, taking the pail from Josie's trembling hand.

Josie felt like a child discovered in wrong-doing, and was exasperated with herself because her aunt made her feel that way so often. Dissatisfaction rose in her like a flame. No matter what she did, it was the wrong thing to do, it seemed.

"I wanted to save a little for the kittens, Aunt Maria," she said crisply.

"Kittens nothin'!" Maria burst out furiously. "We need to save some for ourselves. With one cow dry and the other one not givin' what she should, there's no milk to be wasted. When the pastures come in, they'll do better. We're denyin' ourselves butter for the table right now in order to have some cream for market. Ain't you ever goin' to learn anything about savin'?"

Words trembled on Josie's lips. To her astonishment, they uttered themselves: "Saving? And let the kittens starve, I suppose. One is puny and I'm afraid it's going to die."

Maria accidentally stepped on one of the kittens and it let out a squawk that caused her to fly into a rage. "I wish the whole works was dead!" she raved. "I can't move but what there's one of them under my feet. You've got to do somethin' about these cats, Josiah, they're multiplyin' too fast around here!" Throwing open the back door, she took the broom and shoved the whole litter out onto the porch.

Josie was hurt, but having lived for the past six years in a state of upheaval—or with her Aunt Maria, the two being synonymous, she knew when her aunt flew into a rage the best thing to do was to leave her alone until she got over it. She sometimes wished that her aunt would go and live with her Aunt Arvilla. Surely she was old enough to keep house and look after her grandfather.

She couldn't help thinking of the stranger she had met at the river. He was so respectful, she thought. She had practically given him permission to call, and she was fearful of what kind of a reception her Aunt Maria would give him if he did. What she wanted more than anything else was to live a Christian life, unhampered by her aunt who seemed to have lost faith in God and in people.

When Josie opened the kitchen door the following morning, she discovered the stiff body of the puny kitten on the back step. She was heartbroken and could hardly keep back the tears. Her aunt's cold and unresponsive nature caused her to turn to her grandfather for sympathy and understanding, and when she saw him coming from the barn, she hurried to meet him.

"Look, Grandpap, what has happened!" She pointed to the lifeless form of the kitten. "I'm afraid it didn't have enough to eat."

Pap stooped and smoothed the kitten's fur. "It can't be helped now, dear," he said sympathetically. "I'll have to bury it."

Maria's form suddenly appeared in the doorway. She took in the situation at a glance. "What a fuss to be makin' over a kitten!" she flashed. "It probably foundered. If you took as much interest in other things around here as you do in cats, we'd all be a heap better off. Get in here and wash these dishes!"

"Run along, gal, I'll look after the kitten," Pap said.

The dingy kitchen reeked of boiling cabbage which bubbled in a black iron kettle on the shiny cookstove. A pan full of dirty dishes was topped off by a stack of pots and pans on the kitchen table. Josie couldn't understand why her aunt couldn't cook without getting every utensil on the place dirty.

She set about her task spiritlessly. Her aunt kept a watchful eye on everything she did.

"Ain't you scaldin' 'em dishes?" Maria asked critically.

Josie grimaced. "I forgot it, Aunt Maria," she replied, and taking the gray granite teakettle from the back of the stove, she poured some hot water over what she had left, turning again to her task of drying dishes. She wished her aunt would go on about her work and leave her alone.

A few minutes later, gazing from the window, Josie saw Farrel McIverson approaching the house, and she rushed out the back door in search of her grandfather.

CHAPTER II

APPROACHING the dilapidated old house at Sunnyridge, Farrel was met at the gate by a large Shepherd dog which wagged his tail vigorously. The wire fence, in front of the house, with its squeaky gate, loose from its hinges, was in a bad state of repair. The old board walk that led from the gate to the house was lined with purple iris, and a spirea bush bloomed luxuriantly near the porch.

Large, well-constructed birdhouses, resembling miniature frame dwellings, with doors and windows, were nailed to posts and eminences about the yard. A number of noisy bluejays in gorgeous coats of blue, trimmed in black and white were making a great to-do over nothing.

As Farrel approached the porch, the door suddenly opened, and an austere looking woman stared at him curiously.

"What is your business, sir?" she asked coldly.

Her voice told Farrel she cherished no love for strangers.

"I beg your pardon, Madam, my name is McIverson. I am a naturalist. I was hoping that I might make the acquaintance of some of the people here in the valley who could aid me in my research work."

The woman acknowledged his introduction with an indifferent nod, as much as to say, "You weren't asked to call here," and with obviously no desire to widen her knowledge of science, her head went up in the air.

Swiftly appraising the woman who was giving him such a cold reception, Farrel said judiciously: "Let me see, this is the place they call Sunnyridge, isn't it?"

She nodded coldly.

She was as unfriendly as a coyote. "I happened on to your niece, I believe it was, at the river last evening. She suggested that I talk to her grandfather."

Unknowingly he had exploded a bombshell. He could see that she was obsessed with the belief that any stranger who approached their place came with evil intent.

"Land of Goodness!" she frowned. "My niece ain't mentioned meetin' any strangers. "Stepping to the door, she called in a shrill voice. "Josephine! Josephine!"

Josie, looking fresh and glowing in a yellow dress with her fair hair carefully waved, came from around the house with a kitten in her arms. Her smile was friendly, then she looked questioningly at her aunt.

"Josephine, do you know this gentleman?" her aunt asked suspiciously.

"I — met him last night, Aunt Maria, down at the river."

Maria's eyes blazed angrily. "Why didn't you tell us about it?"

Josie looked about for her grandfather, then feeling that some sort of explanation was due, she answered quietly: "I knew you wouldn't like it, Aunt Maria, if you learned that I had talked with a stranger."

"It was no fault of hers. I will take all the blame. I meant no disrespect by speaking to her, I assure you," Farrell said hastily.

Maria snapped her eyes rebukingly at the voluble stranger. Then, she saw the dog coming around the house with a dead chicken in its mouth. Only a miracle saved the animal's life. She ran to the yard and grabbed a stick of wood and hurled it with all her might at the frightened canine. As it disappeared around the corner of the house, she hurled a final malediction in that direction.

Turning her attention to Farrel once more, she adjusted her glasses carefully and eyed him malevolently.

"You'd better stay away from here, sir," she said coldly. "There has been more than one no-count feller in this neighborhood. I ain't wantin' to hurt your feelings, but we don't like to have strangers around."

Josie flushed with shame and embarrassment.

Farrel was shocked at the woman's lack of hospitality and hurried to explain: "My visit was purely a business one, Mrs. —, pardon me, Madam, I don't believe I know your name."

"Miss Maria Wilkes, sir," she informed him in a brisk, spinsterish fashion.

"I'm sorry to have bothered you," Farrel said curtly. As he was turning away, he saw an elderly gentleman wearing a wide-brimmed gray felt hat and a pair of brown corduroy trousers, coming around the house.

Pap had obviously heard part of the conversation, and frowning, he spoke to his sister with crisp authoritativeness, reminding her that she should be more hospitable to strangers. Maria gave him a scorching look.

Josie tugged at her grandfather's arm, "Grandpap, this is Mr. McIverson. He wants to talk to you."

The men shook hands warmly. Pap was a hospitable soul. No stranger ever stopped at his gate but what he was given a warm welcome. His sister often criticised him for this practice, but he insisted he always felt better for having sent a man on his way with a better feeling.

Staring directly into Farrel's eyes, Pap removed his hat, showing his silvered hair.

"Come, have a drink," he invited. "We've got the best drinkin' water in the whole country here." A rusty tin cup attached to a chain dangled from a nail on the well-top.

Farrel asked for a second cup, and agreed the water was delightfully refreshing.

"I am a naturalist and bird-lover," Farrel explained. "I came out here to do some research work. I was born over here in Phelps county and lived there until I was twelve years old when my father moved to Northampton, Mass., and established himself in business there. Memories of this country have lingered in my mind all these years, and I could hardly wait until I had finished my education to return."

"Well, you're not so much of a stranger then after all," Pap said enthusiastically. "It's too bad Margie ain't here, that's my daughter-in-law that's dead. She was greatly interested in birds. She had my son build these birdhouses that you see about the place. If there is anything I can do for you, I will be glad to do it."

"Thank you," Farrel said, much pleased. He explained the nature of his work in detail. "Do you spend much time in the woods, sir?"

Pap shook his head. "I can't get around very good any more. My granddaughter may be able to tell you somethin' about the birds here."

Maria, who had been listening to the conversation, interrupted —

"Look here, Josiah, if I were you, I'd leave Josie out of it. This man is a perfect stranger to us, and she is almost a young lady now. It wouldn't be proper."

Pap looked at his sister impatiently. "I reckon I know a real man when I see one, Maria. This gent ain't one of them no 'count fellers; he's tryin' to learn somethin'."

Maria turned on her heel quickly, entered the house, banging the door.

"Don't mind Maria, sir. She's a powerful good woman, but she's got an all-fired bad temper, and not much love for a stranger."

Farrel was very eager in his praise of the country and the people, and soon won Pap's heart.

"Come here a minute," Pap said, leading him toward a lac bush where a tiny sparrow had built its nest. "Just take peep in there."

Four naked baby birds with wide open mouths were sking for food.

"Cunning little creatures!" exclaimed Farrel. "And quite healthy looking, too."

Pap chuckled. "I've been watchin' the mother bird feed 'em. She makes a dozen or more trips a day. She's quite proud of 'em."

Anything pertaining to birds interested Josie deeply, and she followed the two men wherever they went, her eyes and ears alert to everything that was said.

The birdhouses about the place were alive with martins and sparrows flitting in and out of the tiny openings. Farrel looked at each one carefully.

"How interesting it is here at Sunnyridge!" he exclaimed, "The birds seem to like it, too."

Pap, pleased to have the old place praised, talked volubly. "There's them martins; I've watched 'em for years. They come ever' year in April and leave in September just as regular as the clock. It's a heap of company to have 'em around, besides they catch mosquitoes and other insects that damage the trees."

They stopped for a moment to inspect a litter of spitz pups frolicking in a pen at the back of the house, exhibiting an abundance of surplus energy.

"I sell those to the people at the clubhouse," Pap explained. "And get a good price for 'em. Do you expect to stay here long?"

Farrel moved closer, and leaned against the well-top.

"I'm looking for a permanent location, Mr. Wilkes. I like this valley very much. If I find the material here that I am seeking, I expect to stay indefinitely."

"I'll be seein' quite a bit of you then, I hope," Pap said warmly.

"It's delightful here, Mr. Wilkes, I'm coming again. My laboratory is the rustic cabin below the clubhouse. I spend the greater part of my time there when I'm not in the woods. I'm a man of many hobbies, and shall be pleased to have you come over and see me."

Pap steadied himself on his cane. "I'll come over the first chance I get," he promised. "Drop around again, it has been a real pleasure to talk to you."

Farrel thanked him for his hospitality, then turned to Josie and raised his hat. "I'm glad to have seen you again. Good-by."

Farrel was much impressed by the Wilkes family, and hoped to get better acquainted with them. From there he went to the Crossroads store. It was a long building with a flat top, and the windows were embellished with tobacco and soap advertisements. It was Saturday and several cars were lined up at the hitching rack.

Inside the store, the shelves were lined with canned goods, hardware, patent medicines, and a few bolts of dry goods. The Wheeler Mill post office, served by a star route from Hill City, was in the rear. Matt and Ruby Higgins had run the store for years. They didn't prosper, but seemed to delight in supplying the needs of their neighbors. They were highly respected in the community.

There were several in the store who had brought in their produce to trade for whatever they needed.

When Matt wasn't busy waiting on trade, he was giving his customers the low-down on politics.

The store porch was the favorite gathering place for the older residents of the valley. Many of them couldn't read, and they had come to depend upon Matt's judgment for their opinions on politics and the world at large.

Farrel made a few purchases and joined the porch-sitters for a few moments.

One old gray-haired man whom they called Jed, was the chief spokesman for the group. He told them just what was wrong with the country. Wall Street was derided shamelessly, and the administration at Washington came in for plenty of ridicule.

Tapping his cane on the porch, Jed said emphatically: "More cooperation between government and industry is what is needed, and every man that's willing to work should have a job."

The other men spat tobacco juice in the air, and listened with avid interest while Jed talked. The deplorable condition of the farmer was gone over pro and con and the heavy tax burden greatly emphasized. One of the group ventured to ask what the outcome of it all would be.

Jed shook his head. "That's not for me to say; I'm a poor prophet, but I'll warrant that there'll never be any change until the people wake up and put a farmer in for president."

The crowd laughed uproariously. "Atta boy, Jed!" several called.

An elderly man drove up in his car, alighted, shook hands with the group, and passed on into the store.

Farrel judged from the men's conversation that it was Parson Willoughby. They appeared to take a humorous view of the aged pastor. One man openly declared that preachers were just out for the almighty dollar. Jed remonstrated by saying that while that was true in most cases, there wasn't a finer man living than Parson Willoughby.

"What kind of gospel does he preach?" inquired one of the men.

"The old Jerusalem gospel, by heck!" Jed snapped. "He also believes in baptism by immersion, and can quote scripture for it."

An argument developed as to whether the water had anything to do with saving a man. Jed settled the question by quoting several passages of scripture.

Farrel walked back to the clubhouse in a thoughtful mood. He was impressed by the simplicity of the people in the valley. Since early childhood, a strong belief in Jesus Christ had been instilled into him, and he hoped to be a good influence upon all those with whom he came in contact.

CHAPTER III

WHEN Pap Wilkes needed help, he usually employed Lem Akery, a neighbor boy. Lem was tall, lanky, red-headed, and strong as an ox. Freckles patched his cheeks and forehead. He lived with his widowed mother on a tract of land adjoining Sunnyridge. Their farm consisted of only forty acres, and he frequently worked for the neighbors.

Lem's name had long been linked with that of Josie's. When there was anything going on in the neighborhood, she allowed him to take her in his old car. It was a rattle-trap affair; the engine sputtered and made a terrible noise when it was in motion, but Lem managed to keep it running.

It was Josie's only means of transportation as her grandfather was too old to go anywhere, and her Aunt Maria never ventured off the place except to market. She had a warm, big-sisterly feeling toward Lem. She knew his temperament and disposition quite as well as she did her own, and he had some faults she wished she could have corrected.

Lem could not bear to be teased by the other boys. When a jibe was hurled in his direction, his red hair would stand straight, and he was ready to fight. He often went into melancholy spells, acted queer, and no one could understand him. Some claimed he wasn't quite right in his mind. His teachers had all experienced difficulty managing him, even from the time he first entered school.

When Josie went anywhere with him, he always wanted her all to himself . . . She would have liked to have mixed with the crowd, but Lem always chose a spot removed from the others and seemed to be perfectly content with her company. His conversation usually consisted of farm talk and the price of livestock. She had often tried to interest him in people and social life, but without success. They had had little fallings-out at times, but she never harbored resentment against him, while Lem would pout for a week. He was quite popular with Maria. The fact that he was a lad of strong muscle, and not in the least afraid of work, had won him a place in her heart.

On this May afternoon, Lem was plowing for Pap Wilkes. Seeing Josie at the old Wilkes springhouse, he left his work for a chat with her.

"It's plenty warm today," he said, filling the gourd and handing her a drink. "It ain't often it gets this hot so early in the spring."

Josie drank the full contents of the gourd.

"Thanks," she muttered. "Grandpap thinks we're going to have another drouth, says all indications point that way."

Lem jerked off his frazzled old straw hat and threw it down.

"No use wastin' time with that gourd. I'm so thirsty, I could drink a gallon." He threw himself down and drank from the spring.

In a tree overhead, an oriole was leaning toward his prospective mate in coaxing tenderness, flashing his fussy tail feathers for her approval.

Josie sat down on a flat rock, while Lem sprawled on the ground. He took his mouth harp from his pocket and rattled off, "*Comin' 'Round The Mountain*."

Josie smiled and tapped her foot while he played.

When Lem had treated her to a few tunes and placed

the harp back in his pocket, she decided to tell him about Farrel McIverson.

"There was a scientist of some sort at our place the other day, Lem. He's interested in birds and plants and trees. He's going to spend the summer here. He's just a young fellow."

Lem laughed until his sides shook. The information that she had conveyed appeared to amuse him greatly.

"What's the matter with you, Lem Akery?" she scolded. "What do you see to laugh at?"

Lem straightened up and eyed her mischievously.

"Well, it just struck me as bein' a funny business for a man to be in. He's one of them fellers from the clubhouse, I reckon."

"Yes, but grandpap says he's not one of them no 'count kind that hunt and fish all the time. He's trying to learn something," she said with defensive brusqueness.

Lem's gray eyes showed disapproval.

"There's a lot of fellers come to this valley who pretend to be somethin' that they ain't. If he's tryin' to learn somethin', I should think he'd learn to work instead of monkeyin' around with such a business as that," he jeered, his tone deliberately taunting.

"He's a nice fellow, Lem, and you'll say the same thing when you meet him," she said eagerly. "He's different from anyone I've ever met before. He's good looking, educated, and has been around quite a bit."

Lem's frowning face, and irritable twiddling of a twig that he had picked up, made a stressful silence.

Finally, he rose to his feet, moved toward her, and stood with his hands clasped behind him.

"Where's he from?" he asked sullenly.

Josie could see that he was greatly disturbed over the news. She could not resist the temptation to tease him.

"From the East, I understand; grandpap says he's very rich. I wish you could hear him talk."

Lem stood staring somberly down at the ground.

"I never pay any attention to such fellers. He's probably like all the rest of 'em. What does your Aunt Maria think about him?"

Josie sailed a flat rock into the creek and watched it dance along on the surface of the water.

Finally, she turned to him and answered boldly:

"Aunt Maria doesn't like any man, Lem, except you. She didn't want him about the place, but grandpap had something to say about that. He invited him to call again."

"I reckon your Aunt Maria knows what's best," he said with a portentous frown. "Better not go mixin' with strangers, especially them fellers from the clubhouse. They ain't carin' anything about your type of girl only to make a fool out of her." He picked up a stick and carefully peeled the bark off with his knife.

Josie knew what he was driving at — knew that he didn't want her to have any friends except himself.

"You talk like I were just a plain common type of person," she said with spirit.

"No, no, not that," he corrected. "You're just different, that's all."

"Oh, Lem, you talk just like Aunt Maria!" she said, provoked. "You seem to think strangers are all bad. You shouldn't judge people until you know them. I like this man very much; he's a gentleman."

Her words seemed to throw him into a rage.

"I'll take care of this stranger from the clubhouse if he tries to horn in where he don't belong!" he threatened.

The sky was clear, and the sun was beating down fiercely on the parched earth. Across the creek, the apple trees had burst into bloom, and the air was filled with their fra-

grance. Despite all this, Lem pouted. He had never liked to hear Josie praise another man.

His attitude put a damper on Josie's good spirits and she maintained a steadied reticence. If he wanted to be as narrow as that, he could just go ahead and be it, she reflected.

"Well, I reckon I'd better get back to work," Lem said, slapping his hat down on his head.

Josie trudged home in an ill frame of mind. Following the evening meal, she went silently about the task of washing the dishes.

Her aunt eyed her questioningly, "What's the matter with you? You seem to be out of sorts."

Josie didn't feel like being quizzed. She ignored the question.

"Did Lem get through?" her aunt inquired.

"He got about half done. If it don't rain, he'll finish this week."

"You two make a good pair." Aunt Maria looked cunningly at her niece.

Josie favored her aunt with a scorching look. She had never liked to be linked with Lem in any way.

"There you go again," she said, with bitterness creeping into her voice. "I get so tired hearing that all the time. I'm not going to marry him, you know."

Aunt Maria eyed her in startled wonder. "Well, you could do a heap worse, I'm thinkin'. Lem's a good boy and he's thrifty. He owns some livestock, and I heard the other day that he was calculatin' on buyin' some land."

Josie knew that her aunt judged Lem altogether by his ability to accumulate money. According to her view, there were other qualities deserving of consideration.

Maria, when she finished her work in the kitchen, went into the living-room and took up her sewing.

Josie followed her when the dishes were done and sank into a chair exhausted. She flung her heavy shoes off to rest her feet. While her grandfather was deeply absorbed in his newspaper, and her aunt busy sewing, she sat in deep thought. She felt lonely. She had begun to realize that all work and no play was bad for a girl her age. She was sorry that having company got on her aunt's nerves, for she would like to have flung the doors of the old house wide open to all the young people in the valley. She wasn't even permitted to have the members of the Young People's Society of the church. She knew that Nora Plunkett, their neighbor on the north, had parties, and she felt that she should be accorded the same privilege. Her aunt had never been in favor of her going out much at night, claiming that it made young people ornery and trifling, but she disagreed with her.

Pap looked up from his paper at Josie's glum face.

"What's the matter, gal? Did you and Lem have a fallin' out?"

Josie loved her grandfather devotedly, and she always told him the exact truth.

"Not exactly, Grandpap, but when I told him about Mr. McIverson being over here, he didn't like it."

Pap chuckled, "Lem's mighty fond of you, I reckon."

"Well, he don't need to be," she said solemnly, suddenly remembering that it always seemed to infuriate her aunt to criticize Lem in her presence.

Aunt Maria turned probing eyes on her.

"You don't need to be puttin' on airs, Josephine," she said reprovingly. "Lem's plenty good enough for you, I reckon. If you don't get somebody worse it'll fool me. I'd like to know where you could find a more steady boy than he is."

"What's it to you, anyway, Aunt Maria," Josie said savagely. "I'm not saying that he isn't a good boy, but

he's got mighty queer ways. His mother is that way, too. The last time I was over there she muttered something about she reckoned that Lem and I would soon be getting married. What right has she got to say such things to me? I've never even given marriage a thought." She coughed nervously realizing she had said too much.

Maria's brows lifted. "Well, you're allowin' him to take you places, ain't you? So long as you do that, you can expect folks to think you're in love."

With a gesture of impatience, Josie snapped, "Well, I'll stay home after this. I'm getting tired of being referred to as Lem Akery's gal. Besides, he's got to thinking that he owns me."

Maria looked at her searchingly, "Huh! You've got the big head, that's all. Lem's car has come in powerful handy when you were wantin' to go somewhere. It ain't ladylike to act like you're doing."

Josie leaped indignantly to her feet, "I don't care anything about his car! There's plenty of others, I reckon," she said heatedly.

Maria's face showed disgust. She carefully put her sewing away.

"Yes, but it ain't everyone that'll be as willin' as Lem has been to take you places. There's other girls he could get if he wanted 'em."

"Who would it be, I'd like to know?" Josie said scornfully. "Who'd go with Lem Akery?"

Pap suddenly roused himself.

"Will you two quit arguing?" he said, with a coolness which caused Maria to stare at him curiously. Then turning to Josie, he added: "Go to bed, child, you're tired and all upset. You'll feel different in the mornin'. A new day always brings us fresh thoughts and renewed courage. The night takes with it whatever bitterness there is in our hearts."

Josie threw her arms about him. "I'm sorry, Grandpap, that I lost my temper, but I do get tired of being bargained off. Everywhere I go the first question they ask me is, 'Where's Lem?' just as if they expected him to be with me."

Pap patted her head affectionately. "I reckon it's because you two have grown up here together. They're the only close neighbors we've ever had. I can recall when you two was just children. Lem used to throw sand in your hair when you was playin' along the creek. Your temper sure flared up then. You've always had quite a bit of spirit for a child."

Maria had been listening to the conversation with a look of profound disgust. "Well, Lem's been mighty good to work for us whether he got his pay or not," she interposed. "He takes as much interest here as he does at home. Being crippled up like you are, Josiah, I don't know what we'd ever do without him."

Josie knew exactly what her aunt was going to say when she opened her mouth, and she had a reply ready.

"I'm not disputing but what Lem's a good neighbor, Aunt Maria, but that's no reason why I should be expected to marry him."

Aunt Maria stiffened perceptibly. "Pooh! How do you know that he wants to marry you?" she asked with her usual sarcasm.

Something inside her was trembling hysterically, so Josie did not retort.

Pap wound the clock and started to remove his shoes.

"Run along to bed now, dear, and let your temper subside," he said, his tone genuinely sympathetic. "I wouldn't want you to marry anyone you didn't care for. Don't forget to say your prayers."

Josie kissed him on the forehead. "Good-night, Grand-pap! Good-night, Aunt Maria!" she said, and climbed the stairs to bed.

The moment she had gone, Maria turned to Pap with flashing eyes.

"Declare to Goodness, Josiah, you're spoilin' that girl to death!"

Pap gave her a look of mild reproach.

"There's times, Maria, when you've got to show sympathy for a child. You've never had one of your own, so you can't understand. It seems to me that you're pretty hard on the girl. You've just got to let them have their way in some respects or they'll get rebellious. They have their problems just the same as the rest of us."

Aunt Maria folded her arms and sat straight back in her chair.

"Humph! Well, I'd like to know what that girl has ever had to worry about. She don't know anything about takin' responsibility. She needs to be disciplined properly."

"Just show her a little kindness once in a while," he suggested.

"Kindness?" his sister flashed. "A good scoldin' would do her a heap more good. If you wouldn't always side in with her I'd have more control over her."

Pap rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "She's nothin' more than a child yet; besides, she's just at that sensitive age when she can't control her temper."

"She could if she wanted to," Maria shrugged. "She's got the very devil in her, but I suppose she came by it honest."

Pap placed his elbow on the arm of the chair and rested his head on his cane.

"As for Lem, whether he gets the girl or not depends upon his attitude toward her; he has to win her."

Maria, with a disgusted look in her face, rose and went into the kitchen. Pap's eyes followed her. He scratched his head and muttered, "Doggone, she gets harder hearted every day!"

CHAPTER IV

MARIA, garbed in her blue and white-flowered dress, was getting ready to go to the Crossroads store. It was about the only place she ever went, and the only contact she made with the other residents of the valley. If Ruby Higgins was not too busy waiting on trade, she visited with her a bit and told her what was going on in the neighborhood.

"I hope company don't come in before I get started," Maria said nervously. "I dropped a knife this mornin' and they say it's a sure sign." She held the patched old screen door open while she shoed the flies out with a tea towel. "Keep the screens hooked while I'm gone, Josiah." She rummaged through the cupboard and added: "I'll declare, we're clear out of coffee ag'in, that last pound went in a hurry."

Pap was seated in one of the kitchen chairs fumbling with his cane. He was sending in for some smoking tobacco. Maria always raved when he ran out, claiming they spent more for the weed than they did for groceries.

"You just ought to try makin' ends meet around here," Maria scolded. "The produce just brought barely enough to pay for the groceries last time."

"You can always charge it if you run short," Pap advised. "Tell Matt not to worry, he'll get his money. He has always been a little too particular about his creditin'."

Pap went to the barn, hitched the young mare to the buggy, and brought it around in front of the house. Maria carefully placed her produce in the back.

"If it rains, Josiah, don't forget to bring the beddin' in, and watch the dog and don't let him get into anything," she cautioned as she started away.

Josie, taking advantage of her aunt's absence, decided to go for a stroll in the woods. It was jolly out in the sunshine. The long line of tall, widespreading elms which lined the river seemed to be marching in the wind with unflung arms. "*Oh, I think when I hear that sweet story of old,*" she hummed as she made her way across the meadow. In the adjoining field there were three plum trees in full blossom. God's gift to man was much in evidence that day.

When she reached the timber, she saw Farrel McIverson seated on a log, his attention focused upon a squirrel. Now that summer was here, she thought with some irritation, she would never be able to roam at will without stumbling onto some of the transients from the clubhouse.

She did not mind Farrel though, especially since he had been to Sunnyridge and talked to her grandfather.

"Why, Josie!" he said with surprise, "I didn't expect to see you today."

"This is my old stamping grounds, sir, I spend a great deal of my time here in summer," she said pleasantly.

A brown-thrasher and a tanager, in a large oak, were engaged in an impromptu duet.

"Listen, Josie!" A cardinal in the top of an elm tree burst forth with its famous, *Wet-year, wet-year, wet, wet, wet, wet, wet!*" He was red all over except a small area around his bill. With only a pause at short intervals, he made the valley ring with his music. "What a beauty, and what a charming singer!" Farrel added.

Josie fell into a speculative mood as she reflected upon the remarkable voice and characteristics of the tiny bird. The forest seemed to be full of wood's noises. A bushy-tailed squirrel chased up a tree, and a woodpecker overhead was busy with his tapping.

They seated themselves on a log, and for the next few moments watched a rollicking bobolink, which was filling the air with its merry, "*Bobolink, bobolink, bobolink,*" first darting forth into the air, then suddenly dropping into the grass.

Josie was enchanted. The absorbing interest that Farrel showed was infectious.

"My mother used to spend a great deal of her time here," she said reverently. "She knew every bird in this locality by name. She kept an aviary, too, and sold the singers for good money."

Compassion shone in Farrel's eyes. "How long since you lost your mother, Josie?"

"Six years, sir. My father was thrown from a horse and killed, and my mother never got over it. They died within a few months of each other." She bit her lip as if to keep from crying.

"Too bad," Farrel said gently. "Did you finish grade school?"

"Oh, yes, and I intended to go to high school, but the crops have been so poor the past two years, grandpap didn't feel like he could afford it."

A yellow-billed cuckoo lit in a large oak tree and set up its rather unmusical, "*Kuk-kuk-kuk, kr-r-r-ck!*"

"He's a stranger here." Josie looked surprised.

"On his way to Canada perhaps," Farrel returned. "Isn't it strange how, by watching closely, we can view and study transient birds? I hope to be here this fall during the migratory period. One can catch a glimpse of many new

species that stop for a few moments rest on their way to southern points."

"Lem heard a nightingale the other night."

"Who is Lem?" Farrel inquired.

"He's a neighbor boy who works for us quite a bit."

Josie knew a great deal about birds herself, and pointed out one or two species with which Farrel was unfamiliar.

"Oh, there's a yellow warbler!" she exclaimed excitedly. "It's been a long time since I've seen one."

The little charmer, resembling a stray sunbeam, with uplifted head, set up its joyful, "*Sweet-sweet-sweeter!*" His yellow breast was streaked with reddish brown and he reminded one of a canary. The tiny creature soon had them under his spell.

Josie forgot about hurrying home. The thickness of the woods, alive with so many bird voices, held her enthralled. The bright sunshine grew warmer and more golden as the afternoon advanced, causing the wild flowers to burst into bloom.

A pair of chickadees with their black skull caps and ashy blue coats set up a twitter. Josie observed that they had chosen a dead snag for their nesting place.

Farrel, after examining the nest himself, motioned for her to do likewise. It contained four of the prettiest half-fledged bird babies that she had ever seen.

"Rather early for nestlings," he remarked. "It's a great study, Josie. Hundreds of people wander through these woods without seeing or hearing any of this; their eyes closed, their minds elsewhere. They can't possibly know what they're missing."

Josie's blue eyes widened, her enthusiasm mounted as he talked. He pointed out to her many characteristics which she had never observed. She drank in every word.

Over near the river, a wren was darting about with a saucy, challenging air. With his head uplifted, his tail drooping, he burst forth with his loud ringing, three-syllabled teakettle whistle.

Josie marvelled at the energy and enthusiasm displayed by a creature so small. So absorbed had she become in the study, she had not noticed that the sun was getting low in the west, and that the shadows were deepening on the river.

Farrel glanced at his watch. "You had better be getting home, Josie, I didn't realize it was so late. When I get in the woods, I never know when to leave."

"You sure do know how to make the birds interesting, sir."

He drew a small book from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Here, take this home with you and read it," he said. "It will help you to understand the birds better."

"Thank you — thank you so much," she said. "Good-by!"

When Josie reached home, she found her aunt had returned long before her, and had worked herself up into a great state of agitation because of her absence. She met her at the door, her upper lip curled in a sneer of contempt. Josie could see that she was boiling.

"What did you run away for, the minute I stepped out of the house?" she asked angrily.

"I'm sorry, Aunt Maria," Josie said apologetically. "I went for a stroll in the woods and didn't realize how late it was getting."

Her words had no perceptible effect.

"You never seem to realize anything any more," Maria said reprovingly. "What's that you've got in your hand?"

Knowing her aunt's turn of mind, Josie answered rather evasively: "Oh, it's just a book that Mr. McIverson gave me to read."

Maria stiffened. "Mr. McIverson?" she gasped. "Where did you run across him?"

"I accidentally ran onto him in the forest." Josie felt the tension mounting.

"Let me see that!" her aunt leered, snatching the book from her hand and eyeing the contents critically. "*Wild life*," she read in amazement. "Well, if this don't beat all! Did that man give you this to read?" she said threateningly.

"It's just about birds and animals," Josie quickly informed her.

Maria's blood pressure appeared to mount another notch.

"Stuff and nonsense!" she flamed. "I'll keep it till I see whether it's fit for you to read or not. You can go on about your work now. It seems to me that you do enough idlin' without readin' books." With a bold fling, she tossed the book on top of the clothes press.

Tears stung at the back of Josie's eyes. "Oh, Aunt Maria, I wish you weren't like this! I want to read and learn things like other people."

Aunt Maria's brow clouded, and straightening up, she spoke briskly, "Well, why not learn to work, and in that way you can earn your salt?"

"You dont' treat me right, Aunt Maria." Josie struggled for composure but a sob shook her. "I've needed a new dress for ages. I haven't a single one that's nice enough to wear anywhere!"

"You've got aplenty of Sunday dresses," Maria said loftily. "What you need is somethin' for ever' day. Those slacks are not becomin' to you. When I was a girl, I never had more than one good dress at a time."

"That's been several years ago," Josie argued. "Nora Plunkett has several dresses. I don't like to wear the same one everywhere I go."

"You're not to pattern off anybody else, Josephine," Aunt Maria said irritably. "You'll wear what you can afford and not bother about other people."

"I'll never be able to have my own way about anything, I don't suppose." Josie seethed inwardly.

"Have you been with that McIverson feller all afternoon?" Maria inquired icily.

"Well, yes," Josie admitted. "I ran on to him unexpectedly and we got to discussing birds and watching their funny antics, and the afternoon was gone before I knew it."

Maria, losing all control of herself, seized the girl's shoulders and pressed her forcibly into a chair.

"What you need is a little common horse sense!" Maria raved, slapping her on the jaw. "Haven't I warned you against talkin' to strangers? You are sure headed for trouble, gal, mind what I'm tellin' you!"

Josie was on the verge of tears. She ducked her head and did not reply.

"Get in the kitchen now and get busy; after supper you can scrub the floor. Seems like you never get around to it during the day."

A slow anger began to burn within Josie. She saw no reason why, if she chose, she should not go anywhere she pleased. She resolved that in the future she would stick up for her rights when her aunt flew into unreasonable rages.

"Ain't you comin', gal?" Maria yelled from the kitchen.

Josie stepped to the kitchen door and stared at her aunt with blazing eyes.

"I'm tired of your crankin,' Aunt Maria! I do my share of work here and more, too, and all I get from you is abuse; I've had enough of it!" She stamped her foot, and before her aunt could recover her stunned faculties to frame a spirited answer, Josie had climbed the stairs, and banged the door of her room shut.

It was not long, however, until she recovered from her anger, and was sorry for her actions. She slowly made her way back downstairs humble and penitent, set to work diligently, making her hands fly smoothly over each task.

She sometimes wished that she could understand this aunt of hers. Her main passion seemed to be her cooking and her housework. She worked indefatigably, and wasn't satisfied unless everyone about the place did the same. She took no time for relaxation or amusement, but kept going at a steady pace all day.

"What makes Aunt Maria so bitter?" Josie asked her grandfather the next night. "Doesn't she love God?"

Pap's face looked sad. "She's just high-strung, I reckon, and can't help it. She gets it from her mother's side of the fence. The Algers came from Kentucky, and are all high-gear'd folks."

Josie told her grandfather about the book Farrel had given her to read, and how her aunt had taken it away from her.

"She appears to be mighty hard-hearted at times," he said gloomily. "I wish she could overcome it, but I suppose it's just a part of her nature."

Josie's love for her grandfather amounted almost to worship. She could talk to him, tell him what was troubling her, and be assured of his ready sympathy.

"I do wish aunt would show me a little kindness, Grandpap. Since mother died, I've scarcely known what love was except what you've shown me."

Pap pulled the girl's head down on his shoulder. "I know it, child, and my heart aches for you at times." After a pause, he continued: "I don't know how we would get along without her, though. She's a good manager. She keeps the house, and buys nearly all of the groceries with her produce money. Besides, we're in debt, and I don't know to save my soul how we're goin' to pay it."

Josie's brow clouded. She knew her grandfather worried over money matters. She wished she could help him. "How much do we owe, Grandpap?"

"Tildah Akery let me have five hundred dollars when your mother died; I've never paid a cent on it exceptin' the interest."

A sudden thought struck Josie, and she asked eagerly, "Why not let me go to work, Grandpap. I'm sure Mrs. Allen could use me in the dining-room at the clubhouse."

Pap looked at her reproachfully. "You're too young to go away from home to work."

Josie looked disappointed. "If only Aunt Maria wasn't so cross, it wouldn't be quite so hard, but I just can't do anything to please her. I want to study and learn things."

Pap's eyes sparkled for a moment. "There's plenty of time yet, my child," he said, patting her head with his hand. "The last word your mother ever uttered was, 'Watch over my baby, Pap, and see that she makes a fine woman.' I promised her that I would. You can be a fine woman without bein' educated, but learnin' helps a great deal, and I mean for you to have it if it's at all possible. Remember, dear, that bein' gentle and kind are womanly qualities, and I'm hopin' that you'll be that way."

Josie listened with deep interest. His words were soothing to her troubled heart.

“Is Aunt Maria a good woman, Grandpap?” she asked thoughtfully.

Pap hesitated for a moment. “She’s a mighty good woman in a way, morally and spiritually; it’s just that high temper of hers that spoils her,” he said gently. “You must guard against such things, and keep yourself sweet-natured like your mother was. No matter what happened, she kept her temper under control.”

“I’ll try, Grandpap, honest I will. I wouldn’t want to be nervous and cross like Aunt Maria. Tell me some more about my mother and daddy.”

“They were as well mated a couple as you could find anywhere, and loved each other devotedly,” he said proudly. “My boy could have looked the world over and he couldn’t have found a finer woman than your mother. I can remember when Grant used to bounce you on his knee when you was just a baby. When you was a little older, he carried you astride his back to the timber where your mother was pickin’ berries, and soon you would all come traipsin’ back with your arms about each other.”

Josie reached up and placed both arms about his neck, pressing her soft cheek against his withered one, fighting back her tears.

“Oh, Grandpap, why couldn’t mother have lived?” she asked sadly.

“That’s somethin’ we can’t understand, dear,” he said softly. “The Lord giveth, and He taketh away.”

Josie’s heart ached for her mother. “There’s nights when I dream of her, Grandpap, and I can see her blue eyes looking into mine so loving like; then I wake up and find that it’s all a dream.”

Pap sat for a moment in deep retrospection.

"If your mother had lived, you'd have been educated," his slow, comforting voice said. "You are just like her, the same big blue eyes, the sweet face and winsome smile. She was always kind to me, and she worshiped you and Grant."

Josie put a hand on his arm. "Well, we still have each other, haven't we, Grandpap? And if mother and daddy could talk to us, they would tell us to be happy, wouldn't they?"

"Yes, dear, they would want that above everything else. They were both unselfish. Your mother was a woman who never thought of self, but was continually tryin' to help somebody else. If there is such a place as heaven, your darling mother is there."

Josie's face brightened. "Oh, I'm so glad, Grandpap! Parson Willoughby says that some day I'll meet her there."

"Yes, you will," Pap agreed. "All you have to do is live your life in keepin' with the Scriptures. I'm afraid many of us won't be prepared when the time comes."

Josie placed an arm on his shoulder. "You will, Grandpap, you've never done anything wrong," she said softly.

"Yes, but your mother always said that there was somethin' else expected of us besides bein' good; she felt that we were supposed to reach out and help others. She was the beatenest woman that way, she didn't have much, but she always had somethin' to divide. I don't believe there was ever one of the neighbors called here that they didn't take somethin' home with 'em. Maybe it was just a few apples or a mess of sausage; she never allowed 'em to leave empty handed.

Josie was deeply touched by the revelation. "I'm glad that I can think of her as being unselfish, Grandpap," she said earnestly. "She was a Christian woman, Parson Willoughby told me that. I'm not going to complain any more. I guess it isn't right."

"We all have our days off, I reckon, but if we will look about us, we can always find others who are worse off than we are," he said soothingly. "If we can keep a kind and lovin' heart in our bosom, that's the thing to be most desired, it will bring us better returns than anything else."

"Good-night, Grandpap!" Josie planted a kiss on his wrinkled forehead and went to bed.

CHAPTER V

A MILE up the river from Sunnyridge stood the Plunkett valley school and church, directly across the road from each other. Both were small buildings, painted white, and situated in a grove of trees. A four-room box-like house, standing on an adjoining twenty-acre tract of land, served as a parsonage for Parson Willoughby and his good wife, Mary Ann.

The parson was a good preacher and his congregation liked him. When hard times came, and his people were unable to meet their church obligations, he stayed right with them. He could have accepted a call to another church which paid a larger salary, but he was attached to the folks in Plunkett valley. His heart was big, his charity broad. Humble by nature, he made his small flock feel that their understanding was quite equal to his own.

Scarcely a day passed but what the parson made a few calls in the neighborhood. He was fond of Pap Wilkes and he never passed Sunnyridge without stopping for a chat. On Pap's veranda, the two men often sat, exchanging views, and puffing away at their pipes.

One fine morning, Pap had just finished spading the garden when the parson drove up and stopped.

"If you're not too busy, I'll stop for a bit," the parson called.

"I took it for granted you'd do that," Pap returned, walking out to the car and shaking hands. "Get out and come in."

Pap offered him the old arm chair which had been reinforced to sustain extra weight.

The parson was a heavy-set man, gray-headed, with a penetrating blue eye, and large feet. He seated himself, sponged off his forehead with his handkerchief, adjusted his glasses firmly on his nose, and eyed his old friend speculatively. He was perspiring freely, and his white shirt was open at the throat.

"Make yourself comfortable, Parson," Pap said. "I'll ask Maria to bring you a glass of cool buttermilk." He walked to the door, exchanged a few words with Maria, and returned to his guest. "How's the world treatin' you, anyway?" he asked.

The parson drew a deep breath. "Can't complain, I reckon, but I'm not as spry as I used to be. My wind plays out. I tried to saw a little wood yesterday and when I finished I was clean tuckered out."

"Well, after we pass seventy we can't expect to feel so spry," Pap said sympathetically. "My rheumatism is causin' me a heap of trouble. It takes me quite a while to get limbered up in the mornin'."

"Are you doctoring any?" the parson asked solicitously.

Pap shook his head. "I've been tryin' to wear it out. They say that's about all you can do for rheumatism."

"Good stand of corn you've got back of the house there," the parson observed.

"Yes, but if it don't rain pretty soon she'll never tassle. 'It'll likely just stand there and burn up without yieldin' an ear of corn."

~~He~~ Maria appeared from within the house with a glass of buttermilk in her hand and offered it to the parson.

"I thought maybe you might be thirsty, Parson Willoughby," she said hospitably.

"Howd'y—howd'y, Maria, that's powerful kind of you, I'm sure. Thanks." He accepted the proffered glass.

"It's just fresh churned, sir. How is Mary Ann?"

The pastor drained the glass and wiped his mouth with his handkerchief.

"She's just as spry as ever, Maria. Nothing could get that woman down. I told her the other day that she'd outlive me ten years."

The conversation was interrupted by Josie who came running from around the house with a frightened look in her face.

"Oh, Grandpap, the pigs have broke into the garden!" she said breathlessly. Then, seeing the parson, she flushed, "Oh, howd'y, Parson Willoughby!"

"Howd'y—howd'y there, young lady," the parson returned pleasantly.

"Them pesky things!" Pap exclaimed, rising to his feet quickly. "I reckon I'll have to fix that fence."

"Well, I think it's time, Josiah! There won't be a post left standin' before long." Maria's voice was full of disgust.

"I'll help you, Pap, if you want to set a few posts," the parson said.

"You'd come in mighty handy if you've got the time," Pap said.

The parson rose and followed Pap around the house.

"Good heavens! That means I'll have to get dinner for him," Maria said impatiently. "That's about all preachers are good for is to gallivant around among the neighbors."

She reentered the house with Josie following her. She had been sewing on a dress that morning and had pieces

scattered all over the bed. "I'll declare, I've got one gore sewed in wrong side out! Oh, well, I'll have to rip it up and do it over!" She threw her sewing together and straightened up the room.

"Maybe I can help you with it tomorrow, Aunt Maria," Josie volunteered, hoping to appease her anger. She thought a great deal of Parson Willoughby and wanted his visit to be a pleasant one. "It really is kind of the parson to offer to help grandpap fix the fence."

"Help nothin'!" "When them two men get together they don't do anything but gab. I have two gallons of cherries to seed, too. I want to put up ever' can of fruit possible this year for it's goin' to be a hard winter."

As Josie changed her dress, she remembered her aunt's predictions every summer were the same. She combed her hair and returned to the kitchen.

"Shall we have a fresh cherry pie for dinner, Aunt Maria?"

"Oh, I reckon," Maria said peevishly, her mind still on the parson. "I wonder if he's solicitin' for the church again? Probably gatherin' up stuff to send to the Old Folks Home. I don't see how we can afford to help any. It's about all we can do to scrape up enough for ourselves."

"I don't believe he's soliciting today, Aunt Maria," Josie said cheerfully. "He probably just stopped to make a friendly call on grandpap."

"Huh! When a preacher starts makin' friendly calls you'd better watch out. He'll be askin' for help for some department before he leaves."

Maria had a red leghorn rooster she had been wanting to kill, so she grabbed a can of feed, stepped out into the yard, and called the chickens. As she scattered the grains of

broken corn at her feet, they came running from every direction; white ones, red ones, black ones, and plymouth rocks. Seeing the one that she had been looking for, she grabbed him while he was devouring the grain. With dexterity, she wrung the rooster's neck and left him to flop.

"You peel some potatoes while I cut up the chicken," she said to Josie.

Josie darted from one room to another with bewildering speed, entering zestfully into the bustle of preparing dinner for company. While her nimble fingers peeled the potatoes she could hear the men working on the garden fence.

Gazing out the window, Maria spied an old hen digging in her flower bed. She dashed out the door at break-neck speed with a stick of wood in one hand and a spoon in the other. "Shoo!" she screamed, hurling the weapon with all her might in the direction of the chicken, then rushing back into the kitchen.

Josie went to the well to draw a fresh bucket of water, spinning the old pulley with a resounding scream.

Once the food was on to cook, Maria flitted about from one task to another, complaining all the while that she could not get her oven the right temperature for baking. Having company for a meal always threw her into a panic. She thrust a stick of wood into the cook stove which proved to be too long for the firebox.

"Now look at that, will you!" she said angrily. "Josiah knew that wouldn't go in the stove when he cut it."

Josie placed the red and white checked spread on the table, took the bone-handled knives and forks from the cupboard drawer, and proceeded to set the table.

"Shall we use the glass sugar bowl and creamer, Aunt Maria?" she asked, stooping to stroke the kitten that had

emerged through a hole in the screen door and was sliding itself around her feet.

"No," Maria said haughtily. "The old ones are plenty good enough. I never believed in goin' to so much trouble for preachers. Maybe he won't stop so often."

A few prize dishes, in many different colors and designs, which were more for show than use, lined the shelves of the old time-worn cupboard. Many of them had been Christmas presents many years back.

Maria made frequent trips to the cellar to get cream, butter, fruit, and vegetables for dinner. Birds were twittering on the window sill, and brilliant sunshine streamed through the small windows. In an elm tree near the house, a bobolink sang joyfully.

Josie looked out the window and saw the men at work on the fence. Her grandfather was holding a post steady while the parson, mounted on a wooden block, was driving it into the ground with a heavy maul. He was making every blow count with marked precision.

"They are really doing a good job of it, Aunt Maria," she said.

Maria came and stood beside her for a moment and looked on.

"Let 'em work," she smiled. "I never believed in men settin' around so much and allowin' the women folks to wait on 'em. I believe I'll stir up a little cornbread, the parson is fond of it." Her movements seemed to be full of vibrations as she went about the kitchen, making every step count.

"While you're not doin' anything else, Josie, you may as well slop the pigs. Josiah will never get around to it now. There's a pail of skimmed milk under the table."

Josie dutifully complied. She was always glad when company came to break the monotony of her daily routine.

When she returned to the house, Maria said confidentially, "Don't tell your grandfather, but I'm savin' up to get him a new shirt for his birthday. I think I'll get a ready-made one if they're not too high."

"Oh, that's right, Grandpap does have a birthday next week. You never forget anything, do you? I know what I'll do, I'll bake an angel food cake and put candles on it," she said with enthusiasm.

When dinner was ready to dish up, Maria told Josie to bring the menfolks in. The kitchen throbbed with a friendly warmth as delightful food odors filled the air.

Josie found the two men in a heated political debate. Her grandfather, with his cane raised above his head, was talking in a loud voice.

The parson obviously sensing what a staunch Democrat Pap was, couldn't resist teasing him a little. He had casually dropped the remark that he did not think Roosevelt ought to have another term, speaking in favor of the Republican candidate. This had aroused Pap's ire, and he had raised his voice in defense of the Democratic administration.

Josie took each of them by the arm and led them to the house.

"Shame on both of you to argue like this!" she laughed. "I'll warrant that neither of you are right."

When the parson entered the kitchen, he was perspiring freely, and his shirt was wet. Pouring some water into the old tin wash-pan, he lathered his hands with soap, and rubbed them together vigorously.

Maria hurriedly placed a fresh towel on the roller.

"I hope you haven't gone to a lot of trouble, Maria," the parson said meekly. "I wasn't expecting to stay for dinner."

Maria poured gravy into a large white bowl. "Not at all, sir. We're just givin' you what the rest of us eat."

Josie wondered why her aunt would say such things, for she knew she had gone to considerable trouble on account of the parson, and it certainly was not their ordinary meal.

When the parson had combed his gray hair until it was slick, Maria said, "Just sit down at the end of the table there, Parson Willoughby." Turning to Josie, she said excitedly, "I'll declare, child, I forgot the coffee. Get the pot on the stove quick and don't put in over three spoonfuls."

Josie opened the cupboard door which gave out an odor of spices, and lifted a jar of coffee from the shelf. The beverage was soon boiling.

The parson dropped his bulky frame into a chair apprehensively as though he feared it wouldn't sustain his weight.

Maria had prepared a good meal. There was plenty of fried chicken, mashed potatoes, cabbage, fresh pickles, and brown crinkly cornbread.

"Now you men start right in," Maria said after Grace had been offered. "The coffee will be ready in a jiffy."

The parson's face bore a wide grin.

"I see you haven't forgotten how to make cornbread, Maria." He helped himself to a prize corner piece, and spread it thickly with country butter.

"Oh, that stove of mine bakes a little too quick!" Maria lamented. "Bread never browns on top like it should."

"It smells good," Pap interposed. "We can't expect everything to be just perfect."

The parson ate with gusty enjoyment. Maria jumped up several times in the course of the meal to replenish the vegetable dishes.

"Josiah, help Parson Willoughby to some more cabbage," she said hospitably.

With avidity, the parson accepted another helping, telling Maria at the same time that she was just a natural born cook, which remark pleased her greatly.

"Why didn't you bring Mary Ann along?" Pap asked thoughtfully.

"Someone has to stay on the place to look after things," the parson explained. "She knows when I start out that I am liable to be gone until dark, so she never looks for me at any certain time."

Josie observed that the food tasted good and was well seasoned, even though the cornbread was burned a trifle on the bottom. She was glad for she knew that Mary Ann Willoughby was an excellent cook, and that the parson was accustomed to having well prepared food.

The dog pushed the screen door open and came walking into the kitchen while they were eating which served to upset Maria.

"Outside, Shep!" she yelled, opening the screen door. When he failed to obey, she grabbed him by the collar and shoved him out with her foot.

When the meal was finished, Pap and the parson pushed their plates aside, got up from the table, and repaired to the veranda. They brought out their pipes and filled them with Natural Leaf.

"Have you been fishin' lately, Parson?" Pap inquired, with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

Parson Willoughby, his eyes scanning the horizon, replied, "Not since you caught the turtle, Pap."

In early spring, the two men had gone fishing, and Pap, sensing some heavy object on his hook, drew a large turtle to the surface.

"Up near the bend of the river is the place to fish," Pap said. "There's plenty of cat up there."

"I don't go fishing very often," the parson replied. "I have such terrible luck."

The conversation turned to religion.

"I have never been what you would call a churchgoer but I've been a prayin' man all of my life," Pap remarked. "I shudder when I think how empty my life would be without God."

"I have never doubted you for one minute, Josiah," the pastor returned. "Your life speaks for itself."

"I'd like to attend church regularly but I have no transportation and ain't able to walk that far. But come to think of it, Parson, that fence ain't fixed yet."

"Right, brother," the parson said, rising to his feet and stretching himself.

It was late in the afternoon when the fence was finished. Pap looked at his big nickel watch and then at the sun which was slipping westward.

"Sure beats all how time flies," he remarked. "You'll have to stay for supper now, Parson."

When Maria learned that the pastor had been invited for the evening meal, she flew into a rage and made the house ring with the clatter of pots and pans in the kitchen.

"Twice a day is too often to cook for a preacher!" she lamented, as she set about making bread for the evening meal. She rolled the dough with deft sweeps of her arms, then with her hands, she molded each biscuit until it was uniform, and dropped it into the greased pan on the stove.

When the meal was over and the parson declared that he must be going, Maria grew more amiable. She brought out a gallon pail of fresh cherries and set them down on the table.

"Here, take these to Mary Ann," she said.

"Thanks, Maria, that's thoughtful of you," the parson said in a voice of appreciation. "We only had one small tree this year and the birds got most of them."

Before leaving, the parson asked the family to bow their heads with him in a word of prayer.

CHAPTER VI

A WEEK later, Josie was excitedly preparing to attend a program and pie-social at the Plunkett Valley schoolhouse with Farrel McIverson.

Pap Wilkes had decided that Farrel was a man worth knowing, and had suggested that he attend the social and meet the young people in the valley. Farrel agreed to go providing Josie would go with him.

Josie had ironed all afternoon, but she helped get supper. She looked forward with pleasurable anticipation to going to the social. Her Aunt Maria had had but little to say to her all day, and she could see that her mind was working furiously. She was careful what she did, for she never knew what moment her aunt would let go of her wrath.

It was going to be a trifle embarrassing for her to go with Farrel because she knew it would cause considerable comment. Besides, Lem would be furious. She did not care much though, she felt that it might be well to let him know that he did not possess her body and soul. Thanks to her grandfather, she was enjoying privileges which had never been granted her before.

When the evening meal was over, Maria lifted her chair quick as lightning, and with the same movement kicked it back under the table.

"If I had my way about it you wouldn't be traipsin' around with strangers!" she said angrily. "You don't dare set much store by what they tell you. They can act awful

nice, but they're not sincere. The most of them are worthless."

Josie was shocked at her aunt's words, and fearful that she would do something yet to prevent her going.

"I know a gentleman when I see one, Maria," Pap answered her. "What's wrong with the young man goin' along and gettin' acquainted?"

Maria gave him a swift look. "Well, if anything comes from it, you'll be responsible. You give in to her too much," she said, her tone suddenly scathing.

Pap bestowed upon her a look of repugnance, wandered out on the veranda, lit his pipe, and smoked vigorously.

Maria started clearing off the table with nervous movements.

"A gal as young as you are ain't no business runnin' around with a stranger!" She glared at Josie who was helping with the dishes.

Josie opened her mouth to speak, but closed it without saying a word. She knew the wisest course was to keep quiet.

"I hope that dog don't raise the roof when you come in," Maria went on in her usual complaining voice. "He barked for a solid hour last night. Do you suppose there could have been prowlers about?"

"No, Aunt Maria, he was just barking because he heard Plunketts' dog barking over across the ridge," Josie replied patiently.

Josie watched the sun go down in yellow splendor, then went to her room to dress. She spent considerable time fussing with her hair. It was fully a half hour before she had every curl arranged to suit her. Just what dress should she wear, she wondered. She wished she had a new one, especially since she was going with Farrel. She looked over

her meager wardrobe. She could count all of her dresses on the fingers of one hand. There was the dark one with the white collar and cuffs, but she was sure that it made her look too old. Then, the pink voile, but she had worn it so much. Finally, she decided upon her linen dress. It was a home-made affair, but she had embroidered the collar, and she thought it was becoming. She would have liked to have put on some make-up, but she knew if she did, it would elicit sharp remarks from her aunt.

When she was dressed, she went into the living-room to wait. From the window she saw Farrel's black car stop at the gate. He alighted quickly and came to the door, his hat in his hand, his face beaming. He was groomed immaculately in a blue suit with necktie to match. She smilingly invited him to come in. He appeared to be as carefree as a boy, and she felt that he was happy, too, because he was going to the social.

Maria eyed him coldly. "Take a chair," she said, dusting it with a sweep of her apron, and moving it into the kitchen.

Pap shook Farrel's hand warmly, and expressed the hope that he would enjoy himself.

When Josie announced that she was ready to start, Farrel rose and opened the door for her.

"Good-by, Grandpap! Good-by, Aunt Maria! I'll be home early."

Seated in the car beside Farrel, Josie enjoyed the sweet-scented air of spring drifting in at the window.

"You have a nice car, Mr. Iverson."

"Thanks. I wish you'd call me Farrel. To be called by my last name makes me feel like a stranger."

Josie smiled demurely. "But we are almost strangers, sir," she reminded him, smoothing the folds of her dress gently with her fingers.

"The way to make me feel at home is to call me by my first name."

Josie laughed, a little embarrassed, "All right, Farrel."

The road to the schoolhouse paralleled the river, and the bluffs on the opposite side of the stream loomed dark and ghostly. As they rode along, Farrel entertained her with stories of his college days, to which she listened with keen interest.

"Here we are at the schoolhouse," Josie said, her eyes focused on the building. "There aren't many cars here yet."

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Farrel and Josie had only been gone a short while when Lem drove up at Sunnyridge in his old car. Carefully dressed in a brown suit, he alighted quickly, smoothed the lapels of his coat, pulled up his trousers, and seemed pre-occupied with something on the ground.

Maria, with a look of fear in her eyes, met him at the door.

"Is Josie ready," he asked loudly.

"She's gone already, Lem," Maria told him with a look of pity in her eyes.

"How'd she go?" he asked, twisting his hat between his hands and shifting awkwardly from one foot to the other.

Maria's voice rose to a high pitch: "She went with that McIverson feller. It's some of Josiah's doin's; I ain't had nothin' to do with it."

Lem's lips suddenly turned white at the corners, and his gray eyes bulged. He stood for a brief moment fumbling with the brim of his hat, the muscles in his face twitching uncontrollably.

Pap came in and saw Lem's embarrassment. "I thought maybe that young feller might like to get acquainted here in the valley, Lem," he said soberly. "It's mighty unpleasant to live somewhere without knowin' your neighbors. This will be a good chance at the social."

Blank amazement filled Lem's face, and without saying a word, he went out to his car.

Merry-making and laughter poured from the little white schoolhouse as Lem parked his car.

Entering the schoolroom, he removed his hat and leaned against the wall, looking on.

Josie stood near the door smiling and bowing to all she knew. She tried not to be shy; she wanted to make a good appearance for Farrel's sake.

"Nora Plunkett, this is Farrel McIverson," she said by way of introduction.

Nora was tall and slender, with blue eyes, and dark wavy hair which she wore in a bob. She was wearing a green crepe dress which was becoming. She bowed profoundly in acknowledgment of the introduction, obviously much impressed by the well dressed stranger. Being a Plunkett, she held her head high.

Seeing Lem leaning against the wall, Josie went over to him. "I'll bet you came by for me, didn't you, Lem? I'm sorry, but Mr. McIverson was strange and wanted me to come with him."

The strange gleam in Lem's eyes which were fixed upon her so steadfastly, caused her to tremble.

Farrel walked up smiling, and Josie introduced him to Lem. Farrel extended his hand, but Lem ignored it. His manner was unfriendly and discourteous. He walked away and seated himself in another part of the room.

"You'll have to excuse him, Farrel, it's just his way," Josie said apologetically.

"I see," Farrel said understandingly, his gaze fixed on the boy.

Farrel was a subject for conjecture by most of the people present, and many curious glances were flung Josie's way. It was not often that one of their young people ushered a stranger into their midst as she had done Farrel, and the good-looking man with his city-bred ways, filled them with awe. Many of the mothers whispered to each other and nodded their heads in apprehension.

Near the front, many tables were piled high with brightly trimmed boxes containing pies which were to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. It was customary for each youth to purchase the pie of his lady love providing he knew which one was hers. They usually arrived early and watched the girls come in. There were many mix-ups and an occasional fight when some young man's ambitions were thwarted.

Following a short program given by the Literary Society, Bob Allen, the auctioneer, was called.

Bob was a tall, gray-headed man, with shrewd blue eyes, and a remarkable gift of gab. When he finally rose to his feet, walked to the front, and stood grinning at the crowd with one hand in his pocket, they began yelling for him to start the auction.

"Hungry, folks?" he drawled.

"Yes! Yes!" the crowd yelled.

Josie's pie was the first to come up for auction.

"Now look here, gents, what am I offered for this dainty thing," the auctioneer cried, holding it out in his hand. "I'm thinking that the young lady who prepared this appetizing pie is as pretty as the trimming. What am I offered?"

"Fifty cents," spoke up Farrel.

The auctioneer grimaced. "Only fifty cents? It's worth a dollar if it's worth a nickel!"

Lem raised it to seventy-five."

"One dollar!" yelled Farrel.

"One dollar and a quarter!" shouted Lem.

"One-fifty," Farrel said with composure.

A pie seldom brought more than fifty cents, and Josie could see that every eye in the room was turned on her. She nudged Farrel and asked him to stop bidding.

Lem looked pleased when the pie was sold to him for one-fifty-five."

The room was thrown into confusion and excitement was tense as the auction progressed. Many of the boys yelled and whooped and stamped the floor.

"Now, friends," the auctioneer said, when all the pies were sold. "I have here a box of candy which is to be awarded to the Most Popular Girl in the room, and votes can be obtained at one cent each. What do you say, boys?"

The men began to gather in groups about the room, whispering to each other in confidence.

"Who'll be the first to start this?" the auctioneer yelled. "Any girl in the house would be happy to receive this great honor."

When Farrel placed one hundred votes for Josie, Lem spitefully supported Nora Plunkett who was finally awarded the honor.

Lem's face bore a triumphant look. This was obviously his way of getting even with Josie for coming with Farrel McIverson.

"Will the young lady please come forward and receive this gift?" the auctioneer asked.

Every eye in the room was focused upon Nora Plunkett who was blushing crimson.

Finally, she walked up front, accepted the candy graciously, and bowed profoundly to the audience. She seemed to be proud of her victory over Josie in the contest, and obviously wishing to show herself off before Farrel, she opened the box and sauntered over to where he and Josie were sitting.

"Have some," she urged, giggling all the while in a self-conscious manner.

"Thanks, Nora, so kind of you to divide," Josie said, helping herself to the first piece and passing the box on to Farrel. "Don't you think you should have given Lem the first chocolate?"

Nora blushed. "What's the matter with him tonight? He seems to have transferred his affections to me."

"He didn't like it because I came with Mr. McIverson," Josie said confidentially.

Nora laughed. "I don't know that I blame him much, you've always come together."

"It's all right for him to come alone once," Josie said indifferently.

"You're not turning him down, are you?" Nora asked.

A shadow crossed Josie's face. "We've never been any closer than friends and neighbors," she said. "He can bring you after this if he wishes."

Nora lifted her eyebrows. "Me? I wouldn't be seen with him," and after devouring another chocolate, she added: "There's going to be a dance at the outdoor pavilion down the river, Saturday night. Can't you two come?"

This sounded gay and exciting to Josie. "Aunt Maria would just about have a fit if I were to suggest going to a dance," she said longingly.

Nora's face puckered with amusement. "Don't tell her where you're going."

Lem came up in search of Josie, holding her pie in the palm of his hand.

"Here, Lem, have a chocolate," Nora said laughing. "Thanks for supporting me in the contest."

Grouped about the room, the couples joked and chided each other while they ate. All appeared to be enjoying themselves except Lem who sat quietly eating the pie that Josie had served him. His countenance was glum.

Nora, eating with Farrel, seemed to enjoy Lem's discomfiture. She was laughing uncontrollably; her mouth full of blackberry pie, and her eyes full of mischief.

Josie tried to engage Lem in conversation, but he paid little attention to her. He seemed to be absorbed in his own thoughts and was blind to the laughing, ridiculous glances the rest gave him.

After a while, Lem raised his gray eyes to Josie. "You're goin' back with me, ain't you?" There was a queer suppressed passion in his voice.

"No, Lem, I'm going back with a man who knows how to conduct himself when he's in the presence of others," she said reprovingly.

Lem made no answer. Looking puzzled and hurt, he tucked his head.

Laughter broke out tumultuously among the crowd, and first one and then the other chided Lem. Josie, knowing Lem's nature, feared that there would be a fight before the evening was over.

Suddenly, when Young Bill Ridge, a tall springy youth, in a loud voice, yelled out that the Akery kid had been let down by his best girl, Lem leaped to his feet, his red hair straight on his head, and his gray eyes popping. With a quick movement he darted over and socked his tormentor in the nose.

"Attah boy, Lem!" The crowd was delighted.

The womenfolks were greatly excited, and everyone tried to see what was taking place.

Watching Farrel, Josie could see that the incident had amused him greatly. She was embarrassed that it had to happen; fearful lest he get a bad impression of the Plunkett Valley folks.

A couple of men grabbed hold of Young Ridge and dragged him out the door to prevent further trouble. Lem was so mad that he pawed the floor. If another man in the room had opened his mouth, he would no doubt have given him a dose of the same medicine.

Josie moved toward Lem and said in low tones, "Look here, you're making a regular fool out of yourself! Sit down there and keep quiet!"

Lem walled his eyes like a sulky child, and obeyed.

The crowd soon broke up and started for their homes.

Josie, a trifle upset over what had happened, was glad to get started home. They passed Lem on the road; he had stopped, and appeared to be waiting for them to pass. A little farther on, Farrel discovered that he had a flat tire, and upon investigation, found that he had picked up a nail. While he was changing the tire, Lem overtook them driving like mad.

"Your friend Lem is rather an odd character," Farrel remarked.

Josie shrugged. She had been wondering if Lem had not put nails in the road.

"Yes, he's got queer ways," she agreed, "And he simply can't bear to be teased about anything."

Once the tires were switched, Farrel leaped into the car, started the engine, and they were soon on their way once more. Moonlight flooded the valley with liquid silver as they wound through the hills.

The night air was cool and refreshing. Accustomed to going to bed early, Josie began to yawn, and suddenly she fell asleep. She awoke at her gate, and her head was resting against Farrel's shoulder.

"Oh!" she said, embarrassed. "I must have gone to sleep."

CHAPTER VII

THE three-story white clubhouse with its wide veranda circling the entire house was built on a hillside which, a few years before, had been covered with timber, dotted with sweet-william and hyacinths in spring, and looking down on the tranquil Gasconade. The velvety green lawn sloped almost to the river. Numerous cabins, built of native logs, were scattered about the grounds.

A swinging bridge for pedestrians, more for allure and pleasure than service, crossed the river near the clubhouse, terminating in a deep forest on the other side. Beneath the bridge was a boat house and a wharf where several small boats and motor launches were chained to the dock. It was a lounging place for trunk-clad bathers.

"What a charming valley!" exclaimed Helen McIverson, Farrel's sister, who arrived the evening before from the East. She stood on the clubhouse veranda gazing out over Plunkett Valley with a look of bewilderment in her eyes. She was a beautiful and talented girl of twenty-two, her blue eyes, fringed with long black lashes, lent a mysterious beauty to her flawless features. Her dark brown hair was done in a smart, upswept hair-do, showing her small perfect ears, and the firm, somewhat arrogant, but altogether lovely line of her jaw. She looked smart and sophisticated and yet wholly feminine. After finishing college, she scarcely knew what to do with herself. Her parents were wealthy, so having no particular vocation, and no immediate prospect

of marriage, she had followed her brother into the Missouri hills. She hoped to take up sketching. She had been quite adept at it in high school.

Farrel was delighted to have his sister join him, and he gave her a warm welcome.

"We need more young people here to liven the place up," he remarked. "Let me see, you were just seven years old when dad moved to Northampton. I don't suppose you can remember Missouri."

"Only a faint recollection," Helen replied. "However, I think it's just simply marvelous here."

"I knew you'd like it," Farrel said. "This is one of the beauty spots of the United States."

"What have you been doing with yourself, Farrel?"

"Working, Sis. There's a world of material here for ambitious students," he said eagerly.

It was a bright June day, and the whole valley was glowing with luxuriant beauty. The air was filled with the perfume of roses and honeysuckles which lined the clubhouse grounds.

"Come with me," said Farrel, leading the way toward his cabin. "I have something interesting to show you."

Helen wore a becoming blue slack suit which fit her slender body perfectly. She took hold of Farrel's arm and accompanied him.

Farrel's study and laboratory was in reality a comfortable, home-like place. The surrounding scenery was highly pleasing to Helen who delighted in the sublime and the beautiful. Morning-glories intermingled with ivy, climbed to the roof. The warm sun lay over it, softening the peculiar structure of native logs.

Farrel showed his sister his books, and the many different specimens he had gathered. Helen gave frequent exclamations of delight.

"Now come with me to the timber," Farrel said. "I want to show you what real nature is like."

Reaching the woods, they stopped and listened. Overhead, the merry voices of the birds were filling the air with a whole symphony of song. Helen stood transfixed, her cheeks bright with color.

"This is truly a sacred and beloved land filled with beauty!" she declared.

They wandered on to the river.

"Look!" said Farrel. "To those who say that there is no beauty, no art here, I challenge them to gaze upon that cliff over there with the overhanging rock. Isn't that remarkable? Isn't that nature carved by God's careful hands?"

"It is indeed," Helen agreed. She kept lifting her eyes heavenward, sniffing the invigorating air. "You have surely found an ideal spot here; I think I shall stay indefinitely."

"I was sure you'd love it," Farrel said. "Wait until you've been here a month, you'll never want to leave."

In a tree, near the bank of the river, a wood thrush seemed to be saying, "*Come to me! Come to me!*" It was a bright brown, brightest on the crown of its head, olive on rump and tail, with large rounded blackish spots on breast and sides.

"Isn't he gorgeous?" Helen remarked. "Are there any wild flowers about?"

Farrel turned to his sister with a look of mild reproach.

"I fear that you aren't very observing," he said, pointing toward a cluster of azaleas close by. "Yes, Helen, the natives know these swamps and woods by the flower inhabitants. There are many different varieties."

"I want to become acquainted with them by name," she said enthusiastically. "I feel that we should learn to appreciate them as much as we do a beautiful rainbow or a gorgeous sunset."

"They are an interesting study," Farrel agreed.

Helen stooped to gather a bouquet of pink flowers which were waving in the breeze. "Exquisite!" she muttered.

Farrel stood gazing at the river. "There's a few ripples this evening," he said.

"What sort of people live here in the valley?" Helen asked.

"Kind hearted country folks. They are unaccustomed to luxury, and lead simple lives; uneducated, the majority of them, but fine people. Once you become acquainted with them as I have, detect their simplicity, their common sense and human qualities, you'll love them. They're a trifle antagonistic toward the transient population of the valley, but it's because of the treatment they have received at their hands. I am eager for you to meet my friend, Josie."

Helen eyed her brother for a moment curiously. "Oh, a love affair, eh? I wondered why you liked this place so well. . . . What is she like?"

Farrel smiled, and considered for a moment, as if searching for a simile. "She's as fresh and lovely as spring flowers; so natural and wholesome."

"I'm anxious to meet her," Helen returned.

Directly overhead, a bobolink was pouring out a perfect torrent of palpitant song.

"Now," said Farrel, tapping his sister's shoulder, "if you'll follow me, I'll take you for a boat ride down the river."

"Okay," Helen said, her voice full of enthusiasm.

The wharf was lined with bathers clad in bright-colored suits basking in the sun. Farrel had rented a boat for the entire season. It was a narrow canoe, painted a dark blue with a yellow stripe, and the oars were light and easy to handle.

Helen seated herself in the bow of the boat and relaxed. Directly above them, a number of new arrivals, talking and laughing, were making their first journey across the swinging bridge.

"I'm going to enjoy this," Helen said, gazing toward her brother who was gettings the oars in place. "In my opinion, there is nothing more alluring than a river."

"It's a keen day for rowing," Farrel said happily.

"Delightful," Helen agreed, gazing down into the mirrored depths.

Little effort was required to maneuver the craft downstream. Lounging lazily, Helen's eyes were wide open, scanning the bluffs and the scenery that bordered the Gasconade. Meadowlarks and cardinals were singing and chirping on both sides. The river was dotted with pleasure craft of every description. Canoes and small boats fringed the landing stages, and scores of fishermen lined the banks.

Suddenly, a canoe, traveling swiftly, pulled up alongside them, propelled by a good looking young man clad in white flannel trousers, and a white sport shirt, open at the collar. He had light brown hair, combed straight back, and blue eyes that appeared to be vaguely pleased with the world and all its people.

Helen exchanged friendly glances with him.

"Pardon me, I am Horace Allen from the clubhouse," he said huskily. "I just arrived a few hours ago, and couldn't resist a run down the river. Dad has been telling me about you folks. I'm glad we have some young people stopping with us."

Farrel's face broke into a smile. "Mr. Allen told me yesterday that he was expecting you. My name is Farrel McIverson, and this is my sister Helen."

Horace leaned over and extended his hand.

"We'll have to be friends and liven up the old place a bit," he said, smiling at Helen. "Do you like to dance?"

"Oh, yes," Helen said. "I think it's fun."

"I want to call your attention to that stone over there," Horace said, pointing toward the bluffs at the right of them.

A large stone, set high on a bluff, had been carved into a bust of Abraham Lincoln.

"Old settlers here claim that it actually resembled Abe before it was ever touched by a man's hand."

"That's wonderful," Helen said interestedly, "You surely have a beautiful valley here."

Young Allen, his blue eyes sparkling, scarcely took his eyes off Helen. "Where are you from?" he asked.

"Massachusetts," she informed him. "Don't we have the New England brogue?"

"I hadn't noticed it," he said. "Going to be here long?"

"Oh, yes, quite a while," she laughingly replied.

"I hope to see quite a bit of you then. If I can be of any service let me know."

"Thank you!" Helen said in a voice of appreciation. "We may call on you."

"Interesting young chap!" Farrel exclaimed when Horace had moved on.

"Quite so," Helen agreed. "I think I'm going to like him a lot."

When they had gone about three miles, Farrel, with clever manipulation of the oars, turned the craft and headed back toward the clubhouse.

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The following day, Josie, wearing a blue linen dress, called at Farrel's cabin to deliver a collection of native bark

which she had gathered. He had expressed a desire for a sample from each tree that grew in the valley. She knew nothing about the arrival of his sister, and was surprised when she saw the carefully groomed girl seated by the window.

"Josie, I want you to meet my sister, Helen," Farrel said.

The girls looked at each other for a moment in silent appraisal.

"I didn't know you had company, sir," Josie said, looking admiringly at Helen. Her heart throbbed with excitement.

"Helen came day before yesterday," Farrel responded in a friendly manner. "I trust you girls will be good friends."

Helen was wearing a cool pink afternoon frock which matched the color in her cheeks and accentuated her fine features. Strapped, high-heeled white oxfords covered her small feet.

"My brother has been telling me about you," Helen said, rising, and taking one of Josie's trembling hands in her own. "I've been so eager to meet you."

Josie felt rather awkward and self-conscious in the presence of Farrel's sister. Helen's voice was soft and warm like the look in her eyes. She was deeply touched by the friendliness in her manner. She could see that there was a strong resemblance between brother and sister.

Farrel examined the bark carefully. There was a sample of the oak, the maple, the elm, and many others. He pasted each one on a cardboard and labeled it.

Helen looked on curiously. "I scarcely know what to think of this erratic brother of mine who chooses to isolate himself from the world and study nature subjects," she remarked. Turning to Josie, she added: "Won't you come up to the clubhouse with me? I want to get acquainted with you."

Josie had never wanted to do anything so much in all her life, but she knew what her Aunt Maria would say about it if she did. She had been brought up to regard the clubhouse as a place of evil. She tucked her head and did not reply.

"Can't you?" Helen urged.

Josie decided to go even though it precipitated a quarrel with her aunt. "I'll go, but I can only stay a short while."

Helen placed an arm about Josie and led the way to the clubhouse. As they ascended the steps that led to the entrance, a pleasant-faced, gray-haired woman rose to greet them.

"Mrs. Allen, this is my friend, Josie Wilkes," Helen said, by way of introduction.

Mrs. Allen bowed and smiled. "Oh, you're the girl who lives across the river, aren't you? I believe I've seen you before."

Josie's eyes popped as she entered the building. It wasn't at all like her imagination had pictured.

"I know I'm going to like you awfully well, Josie," Helen said, when they reached her room. It was a large airy affair overlooking the valley. "You see, I'm a stranger here, and want to get acquainted."

Josie gazed about the room awe-stricken. The beautiful walnut bedroom suite, the expensive looking rug, all quite elaborate, contrasted with the plain furniture at Sunnyridge.

"No one could help liking you, Miss Helen, you're so friendly," she returned. "You've sure got your hair fixed nice. I wish I could do mine that way."

Helen looked at her new friend's hair speculatively.

"I believe I can dress your hair becomingly," she said eagerly. "Would you like me to?"

Josie's face beamed. Why not be like other girls? she thought.

Helen was accustomed to dressing her own hair and she spent considerable time trying to keep her curls in place.

"All right, come over here and sit by the window and we'll see what we can do."

"This is a beautiful room," Josie said, taking the chair indicated. "I never imagined it was this nice up here."

Helen smiled at her affectionately.

"It's delightful here, and Mrs. Allen is such a dear, sweet woman; I'm sure you'll like her. Come up and see me real often, won't you?"

"I'll try," Josie promised, wondering what her Aunt Maria would think about it.

Josie next went into raptures over a Pekinese pup that had wandered into the room.

Helen stooped to pet the dog for a moment.

"Mrs. Allen's quarters are just across the hall," she explained. "This pup belongs to her. We have a Boston Bull at home; mother thinks he's wonderful."

Helen kept up a steady flow of chatter while she worked, telling Josie about her trip from the East, and how charmed she was with Plunkett valley.

Josie listened without question or comment, gratitude and worship shone in her eyes. She sensed that Farrel's sister was a very lovely person.

"Your hair is beautiful, dear," Helen said, combing out the long silk-like tresses.

"Do you really think so?" Josie asked dubiously.

"It surely is," Helen said emphatically. "It's glossy and stays right where you put it." She arranged it in many different styles until they decided which way was the most becoming. Each time Josie viewed herself in the mirror.

"Now we have it," Helen said admiringly. "How do you like that? It's quite becoming." It was parted in the middle, and held in an old-fashioned coil at the nape of the neck.

Josie gazed at herself in the mirror and laughed. She turned her head from one side to the other, thinking that it made her look older than her sixteen years.

"I like it this way," she said complacently.

"Changing the style of one's hair alters one's appearance, doesn't it?" Helen said, placing every loose hair in place. "You look darling, really you do! You have such a sweet face, too. I should take up beauty work for a profession."

"I'm afraid Aunt Maria won't know me when I get home," Josie said, rising to go.

"Oh, but you don't have to go yet," Helen protested. "We've been so busy, we haven't had time to get acquainted. Do you play tennis?"

Josie shook her head.

"Would you like to learn?"

Josie smiled briefly, confusedly, and muttered, "Oh, yes."

Helen's face brightened. "Then come up again real soon and I'll teach you the game. I have some racquets and there is a court just back of the clubhouse. Wear shorts or slacks whichever is convenient. We're going to have such good times," she said eagerly.

Josie opened her mouth to reply, then fearful what her aunt would say about it, she became awkwardly reticent.

"You must come over again soon," Helen said, when Josie insisted that she must go. "I'm so happy to have met you!"

Josie thanked her in her modest manner, and asked her to call at Sunnyridge.

She trudged home slightly out of sorts. Why must she always feel that she had a yoke about her neck? Always something to keep her from doing the things she wanted

to do. A surge of resentment swept over her as she thought of how her Aunt Maria dominated her. Why hadn't she been allowed to develop in her own way like Helen? Never in all her life had she met anyone so friendly, so charming, and so likeable. She wished with all her heart that she could be like her.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE days that followed, Josie was a frequent caller at the clubhouse. Occasionally Helen would visit Sunnyridge where she was looked upon suspiciously by Maria who seemed to resent the intrusion. She had a way of making folks feel so uncomfortable in her presence that they were in constant fear lest they do or say something which would bring a sharp remark from her.

Helen, who had always prided herself on being a good judge of human nature, was forced to admit that Josie's aunt had her puzzled. When visiting at Sunnyridge, she would sometimes put on an apron and perform some little service for her, but she didn't seem to appreciate it.

During her visits, Maria contrived to occupy an immense amount of time in discussing morals and the transient element that came to the valley.

The more time Josie spent with Helen, the more convinced she became that her Aunt Maria's ideas of people were all wrong. Just why she chose to be cold and unfriendly toward folks, and regard life in general so seriously, was more than she could understand. She was glad that Helen kept coming for she had learned to think a great deal of her. They often sat out in the orchard beneath an apple tree loaded with luscious fruit, and exchanged confidences. She sensed that Helen did not consider dress of first importance; she talked of people who were rich in character, and who knew something of sound values. And once she had heard her express her faith in God.

She saw that Helen was greatly interested in Sunnyridge. The older the place, the more enthusiasm she evinced over it, it seemed. She examined each old piece of furniture as if it were of great value, and when she showed her the dishes in the cupboard one day, she was delighted.

"Why, Josie, these are wonderful; you could sell them for a good price," she said enthusiastically. "Dishes are like good violins, the older they get, the more valuable they become."

Josie often felt ashamed of what they had, but hearing Helen rave over everything caused her to place a new value on them.

Helen had purchased a complete sketching outfit and had become an avid painter. Seeking to capture some of the beauty before her eyes, she made interesting sketches of the river and the forest.

She spent several days sketching the old house at Sunnyridge, and was bitterly derided by Maria for indulging in such foolishness.

"Just plain showin' off; she'd better be learnin' to work," Maria remarked.

One day, Josie called at the clubhouse and Helen allowed her to try on some of her dresses. Her eyes dwelt rapturously upon the collection of finery.

"Why, that dress fits you perfectly," Helen said, with surprise written in her face.

The dress was pink silk with a cape effect, and Josie loved it. Helen dressed her hair becomingly and led her to the mirror. "Now, you look like an altogether different girl."

When Josie saw herself, she gasped; could that handsome girl smiling back at her be herself?

"Let me give you that dress," Helen said magnanimously. "I know how hard it is to get anything out here. I don't know that I'll ever wear it again, and it looks lovely on you."

Josie looked at her in astonishment. "You wouldn't want to give away such a lovely dress as this."

"Yes, I want you to have it." Helen looked at her from every angle.

"I wonder what Aunt Maria will think of it?" Josie said suddenly.

Helen laughed. "Your aunt is a dear, Josie, but she doesn't understand that styles change as well as the seasons. I believe she is a noble woman and I wish I could make her like me."

"She doesn't appear to like anyone." Tears came into Josie's eyes. "I wish she wasn't that way. You can't know what it means, Helen, to be without father or mother. I've been miserable since they died!"

Helen's eyes showed compassion. "I know how you feel, dear, but you must learn to be happy. Come, let's go show Farrel how darling you look in that dress."

Farrel, busy at work, looked at Josie in startled wonder.

Josie, breast heaving, her sweet face flushed and smiling, stood before him with childish innocence.

"I'll declare, Josie, I hardly knew you!" he gasped.

Her smile widened, and the slanting rays of the sun illumined the gold of her hair.

Farrel's gaze lingered. "What minute did you grow up?" he asked mischievously.

Josie's heart beat happily and a warm glow suffused her cheeks as she stared self-consciously at him. "Just now, I think."

"Doesn't she look darling?" Helen asked.

"Gorgeous!" Farrel agreed, rising to his feet. "You'd better not let your boy friend see you or he's liable to become more angry than ever toward anyone who looks at you."

Josie laughed. Thoughts of what Lem would think of her caused her but little concern. To her starved heart, the

attentions paid her by Farrel and Helen were tremendously welcome. They were changing her whole life. The fact that Helen was willing to share anything she had with her was proof of her friendship. She had nothing but admiration for her new-found friends.

As the summer advanced, Josie accompanied Farrel and Helen wherever they went. They visited all the nearby towns, and the change from her dull, drab life at Sunnyridge, giving her the opportunity to meet cultivated people, brought about a swift change in her. She began to view life differently. Her timidity vanished, and a strong desire to meet and mingle with boys and girls of her own age, gripped her. She had learned to play tennis; at first, she was a trifle awkward, but soon became so enthusiastic over the game that her self-consciousness disappeared, and she became quite adept with the racquet.

It was necessary at times for Josie to openly defy her Aunt Maria, who did all she could to keep her at home, declaring that no good would come from her gallivanting around. She found a strong ally in her grandfather, who knowing the hardships that she had undergone, and observing how much she was enjoying life, did nothing to stop her.

Helen came to Sunnyridge one afternoon and pleaded with Maria to allow Josie to accompany her to a clubhouse party.

"There's really a nice bunch of people go there," Helen said.

Maria was seated at the kitchen table fanning herself with her faded, but scrupulously clean apron.

"I'm sorry, but I can't allow you to go," Maria said to Josie. "If there's one place that I loathe more than another, it's that clubhouse."

"Oh, please, Aunt Maria, just this once!" begged Josie. She wanted to go so much she was sick. Knowing how her aunt felt about such things, she had refrained from going

without her permission. "I've never been to a party in my life," she added. "I just want to look on a while."

Maria was obdurate. "You'll never go to such a place as that with my approval," she said scornfully.

"I don't see any harm in her goin', Maria," Pap interposed. "I reckon it's just natural for young folks to want to gallivant around."

Maria drew herself up stiffly. "Yes, but remember she's a member of the church in good standin'," she retorted.

Pap's blue eyes twinkled. "Well, if she never does anything worse than this, she'll never hurt the church any." Turning to Josie, he added: "Get ready, gal."

Josie leaped at her grandfather and kissed him so vigorously he dropped his pipe.

Maria was furious, but was forced to smother her anger after Pap said Josie could go.

"I'm not uneasy as long as Josie's with this girl." Pap gazed fondly at Helen.

So Josie, accompanied by Farrel and Helen and Horace, attended the party.

The bright lights, the gay colored dresses the women wore, thrilled Josie's timid soul. She looked on in rapture. Many of the people were strange to her; she supposed that they were guests at the clubhouse.

Farrel insisted upon her taking part in the games but it took all of her courage to make the effort. The games were all new to her and she was afraid she wouldn't be able to catch on quickly. She played Ping-Pong for a while, then walked with Farrel out onto the veranda. A full moon shed its light over the valley, and the stars shone like bright jewels.

"It's delightful here, isn't it?" he remarked. "The river looks like a silver highway in the moonlight."

"It really does," Josie returned. "I've never been up here before at night."

"Would you like to meet some of the people here?" Farrel asked.

"No, Farrel, I'm rather shy about meeting strange folks. Somehow, I don't know what to say to them."

Farrel laughed. "You'll get over that. I was the same way when I was about seventeen."

"Would you mind telling me how old you are now?" she asked timidly.

"Not in the least. I'm twenty-five."

"I wouldn't have taken you to be over twenty-two."

They walked back into the house and joined the crowd. Helen was playing some sort of game with Horace Allen. Since the day Helen had met him on the river, their friendship had deepened.

"Don't you want to join us here?" Horace asked, smiling at Josie. "We're having oodles of fun."

"What's the game?" Farrel asked.

"Oh, it's an Irish game called Limerick."

"Too dull to suit me, I'm afraid," Farrel said. "I like games with some action in them."

Helen eyed her brother in surprise. "I never knew that before, I thought you liked intellectual games."

"Come, let's wander around a bit," Helen said, rising. "Let's go over where that fellow is playing the piano."

The man was strange to Josie, and she was amazed at the talent he exhibited on the instrument.

"That man is a broken down musician and is out here for a rest," Farrel explained.

"He seems to put everything he's got into his music," Horace remarked.

The evening was a long-to-be-remembered one for Josie. It had been the outstanding event of her life. She had enjoyed every minute of it.

When she returned home late that night, her Aunt Maria was waiting up for her but she did not scold. She just looked at her for a long moment, then blew out the light in the kitchen and went to bed.

CHAPTER IX

THE SUNNYRIDGE household was thrown into a panic the following morning when the Star Route man drew up at the gate with a telegram. He had come a half mile out of his way to deliver it.

"Here, read it!" Maria gasped, handing the telegram to Josie.

Josie's eyes quickly scanned the telegram. . . . She tore open the envelope and read:

Crane, Mo. 515 pm July 1-1940

Maria Wilkes,

Wheeler Mill, Mo.

Arvilla very sick. Come at once.

Dr. Sawyer.

Maria gasped for breath when she heard the words. Josie placed an arm about her and led her to a chair.

"Arvilla dying!" Maria gasped, overcome with emotion.

"It don't say that, Aunt Maria, it just says that she's very sick," Josie corrected.

"It's all the same, I reckon. She must be awful bad or they wouldn't have sent that telegram. I felt this mornin' that I was goin' to hear bad news of some kind."

Pap, shocked at the news, sat with his head down in deep thought. Arvilla and Maria were the only two sisters he had.

"I don't know how I can leave here with so many things to look after, and nobody that I can depend on." Maria shook her head. "Besides, we can't afford it."

Pap straightened himself, took his wallet from his pocket, drew out a faded ten dollar bill and handed it to Maria.

"Here, I've been savin' this for just such an emergency. Get ready and go and do what you can for Arvilla; she is no doubt needin' some help. We'll take care of things here."

"I'll declare, but I haven't a thing fit to wear on the train," Maria complained.

Josie tucked her head thoughtfully for a moment. She knew how much her aunt disliked to leave home, and she shuddered when she thought how hard the trip would be on her. She could scarcely remember her Aunt Arvilla in Taney county; she was only five years old when she last visited them.

"It's warm, Aunt Maria, you won't need a coat; you can wear your blue voile."

After much discussion, Maria finally decided to go. She spent the next few hours making preparations. Josie and her grandfather were given strict instructions what to do in her absence.

"Scrub the kitchen ever' day; it gets so filthy if you don't," she cautioned. "And be as savin' as you can with the milk."

Josie nodded an understanding head.

"Be sure and keep the cellar door closed," Aunt Maria went on. "If you don't, the dog will get in there and turn the milk over. There's three pounds of fresh butter in a crock on the shelf, and three dozen eggs in a basket under the bed. You'll want to save them up to take to market for we're about out of groceries."

"Yes, and I'm about out of tobacco ag'in," Pap said.

"Humph! You could do without that, I reckon." She turned to Josie and added: "The skimmed milk is good enough for table use."

"Yes, Aunt Maria," Josie said understandingly.

"You won't have much time to gallivant around if you keep the work done up. I always wash and iron on Monday, you know, and do what darnin' and mendin' there is to be done. On Tuesday, I work the garden over, and if I have any time left, I pull the weeds out of the flower beds. On Wednesday, I gather up what fruit and vegetables I can find and can 'em. Thursday, I get the cream and eggs together and take 'em to market. I don't get much done on that day except go to the store. On Friday, I do the bakin', and it takes quite a while to set the dough and wait for it to rise. Saturday, I clean the house from top to bottom, and you know what a chore that is. It will probably be good for you to take on this responsibility for a while."

Josie did everything she could to help her aunt get started on her journey.

"I'll declare, but I don't know what to take with me," Maria said. "If I knew how long I was goin' to be there, it would be different. Arvilla is probably just lyin' there with no one to look after her but the neighbors."

"I'd take enough to last me a few days," Pap advised. "And stay just as long as you're needed; we can get along here."

"Yes, Josiah, in time of sickness everything else can wait. Arvilla is gettin' to the age where she'll have to take care of herself. The last letter I had from her said she was not feelin' well; said she hadn't been anywhere for ages, and didn't know much about what was goin' on in town."

"I wonder how she's fixed financially?" Pap said.

Maria shook her head. "She can't have very much, her husband just left her barely enough to live on."

Finally, after much preparation and frustration, Maria was ready to go. She was going to walk a half mile down to the highway and ride into Hill City with the Star Route man where she would board a train for Crane. Her shape-

less body was swathed in blue voile with white flowers in it, made with big sleeves and a wide skirt. A black summer hat trimmed with white ribbon perch on top her head. She had not worn it for so long, it was out of shape, but she had straightened the wire in the brim and smoothed out the ribbon with a flat iron.

Josie accompanied her aunt to the lane, carrying the old black suitcase which had been in the family for years. Maria was not used to wearing a corset, and by the time they got half way, she was gasping for breath. She had on a new pair of shoes which she complained were hurting her feet so badly that she could hardly walk.

"I wish I had taken some sassafras roots to make Arvilla some tea," Maria remarked. "I knew I'd forget somethin' leavin' in such a hurry."

"I can send anything you have forgotten, Aunt Maria," Josie said eagerly.

"Well, it would take a heap of postage, I reckon. I'll see how she's feelin', she may not be able to drink tea. It will be late in the night when I get there, I suppose. If it is, I'll just sit in the depot till daylight."

Josie, seeing the beads of perspiration on her aunt's forehead, slowed up a trifle. "We're just about there now. Aunt Maria."

"Whew! If it was any farther, I just couldn't make it, that's all," Maria gasped as they turned into the lane.

They had to wait about twenty minutes before the Star Route man came along in his car.

Maria picked up her suit case. "Don't forget what I told you about takin' care of the milk pails; they get in such a mess if you don't. And remember, if the cows ain't stripped, they'll go dry. You'll have to remind your grandpap of certain things, he's gettin' old and can't remember like he used to."

The car stopped, the driver threw open the back door, and Maria climbed in, talking all the while.

"Don't run off anywhere and leave the place while I'm gone or the hawks are liable to get the little chickens. I wouldn't have that McIverson feller around either or folks are liable to talk."

The car started with a prodigious jerk which almost threw Maria against the top of the car, and Josie heard her hurl an invective at the driver as she waved good-by.

Josie thought at first that it was going to be a lot of fun to keep house all by herself; to plan the meals, and buy the groceries, but she soon learned that there was a great deal of hard work connected with it. Washing and ironing and gardening was no easy job. When night came, she was completely fatigued.

She tried her best to follow her aunt's routine, but when the end of the week rolled around, she was three days behind.

The following Monday they received a letter from Maria. It was filled with advice and admonitions. She said Arvilla had had a severe case of influenza, but that she was gaining strength, and she thought that with careful nursing, she'd pull through. She reminded them that the tree of clingstone peaches back of the barn would soon be ripe, and warned them not to let outsiders get them. A postscript read: "Make all the jell you can for it'll come in handy this winter, and don't use too much sugar. Remind your grandpap to look after the chores; he's rather dilatory about it."

Josie read the letter the second time, then went on about her work. She hadn't seen Lem since the night of the social, and she presumed that he was angry with her. She was sorry for him and his mother for she knew they didn't have many friends, but he must be taught a lesson. He had declined to work for her grandfather on two different occasions, and they had been compelled to hire another man.

As she went about her work, she wished the house didn't seem quite so lonesome. She became tired of her aunt's fuming around, but she missed her dreadfully when she was gone.

She asked Helen to accompany her to church the following Sunday, and introduced her to many of the residents in the valley.

Parson Willoughby chose for his text that morning Micah 6:8, *"And what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God."*

"God is our refuge and strength. From Him we receive wisdom, courage, and help. Only by following in His footsteps can we face the future unafraid," the pastor said in a convincing voice.

"Let us consider for a moment the requirements of our Lord in this sixth chapter of Micah: 'To do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.' This means righteous living, deeds of mercy and lovingkindness. It means the uprooting from the heart of all worldly desires and ambitions and making a complete surrender to His will."

"Our greatest ambition should be the continual remaking of ourselves into individuals whom God can approve. Every resentment we encourage, every unfair practice, every smug conceit, tends to belittle us in the sight of God."

"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We should strive to be like Him. Let us not be a Dr. Jekyll one day and a Mr. Hyde the next. God and truth remain forever steadfast."

"When we see people groping along in the dark, their minds and hearts bent on worldly things, we are moved to compassion. We know that they have never experienced the peace and comfort that comes to those who follow after Christ."

"We can strengthen our spiritual life by spending an hour each day in fellowship with God. We should make spiritual growth the chief desire of our hearts."

"I liked the parson's sermon," Helen remarked to Josie when the services were over. "He seems to be so genuine, so sincere. I was impressed by the warmth and spirituality in the church."

"I wish you knew Parson Willoughby as I do, Helen," Josie said seriously. "He's a wonderful man. You can always find him wherever there's sickness or trouble."

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Maria returned after a three-weeks absence and found that nothing had been done to suit her. Josie, instead of doing precisely what she was instructed to do, had used her own ideas and changed the furniture around to suit herself. Pap had been careless with his pipe, and ashes were scattered all over the house.

Maria was voluble in her disgust. Indignation seemed to afford her a small measure of relief, and Pap received a severe tongue lashing. She flew into the work with lightning-like rapidity, getting things back in their place while Pap looked on with repugnance.

"I'll declare, it'll take me a whole month to get caught up with the work," Maria lamented. "That gal has never been taught to take any pains with what she does."

"She did the best she could," Pap argued. "She tried mighty hard to do everything to suit you."

Pap obviously cherished no admiration for his sister's hateful qualities, and when she started her daily lamentations, he would retire to his rocker on the front porch for refuge.

Maria went into a panic one morning, shortly after her return, when she discovered that Sunnyridge had been

visited by chicken thieves and fifty of her largest springers taken. Appalled and disgusted, she burst into furious tears.

"I don't see how they ever got away with them without us hearin' 'em," she said with venom.

Pap scratched a puzzled head. "Well, it's a mystery to me how they done it," he said, in a voice tinctured with trepidation. "I usually wake easily. I did hear Shep bark once in the night, but I never paid much attention to it. He often barks when he hears another dog barkin'."

The loss of the chickens had the effect of stirring Maria to extreme irritability for several days. Her repetitions of invective, "That thief! That thief!" were plainly audible to Josie and her grandfather.

Pap notified the authorities, but no trace of either the chickens or the thieves could be found.

The fact that Josie continued to go out with Farrel and Helen infuriated Maria. She followed Pap to the porch one day and said in a voice charged with vindictiveness: "That McIverson feller is tryin' to make a fool out of Josie!"

Perplexity and a hint of anger clouded Pap's eyes. "You shouldn't have such thoughts, Maria."

"Well, what does an educated man like him care about a girl like her? The first things she knows, she'll be in trouble."

"You greatly misjudge the man. Josie is enjoyin' herself more than she ever has in all her life. Why spoil her fun?"

Maria looked at him with icy annoyance. "It won't last long, mind what I'm tellin' you," she flared. "She'll be brought to sorrow gallivantin' around like she is. Did you notice the dress that Helen gave her? It didn't have a sign of a sleeve in it. If I had worn such a dress as that when I was young, Ma would have raised the roof."

Pap lit his pipe, only to be reminded by Maria that smoking aggravated his cough.

"Times have changed, I reckon, since you was a girl," he said, with a touch of ridicule in his voice. "Folks dress more for comfort nowadays."

Maria squirmed uncomfortably. "Comfort, eh? Well, they go stark naked around that clubhouse at times," she retorted.

"Well, that's no sign that they are not as good as we are," he remonstrated. "They're just different, that's all. The womenfolks are not wearin' dresses that sweep the floor any more; this is a different age."

"They're wearin' clothes that are immodest, that's what they're doin'!" Maria retorted bitingly.

Pap snapped his eyes rebukingly at his sister. "I guess I'll never be able to understand your attitude," he said at last. "You go about your work each day just as if life wasn't anything more than a hard grind."

Her voice rose shrilly: "Look here, Josiah, you just help shoulder the burden around here and that will help me a great deal!"

Pap's face was grim: "There's no use for anyone to be as cranky as you are."

Maria's jaw set itself grimly. "Just to think allowin' that gal to go to dances at that tough pavilion; how do we know whether they're decent or not?"

"I wouldn't worry about it, Maria," Pap said consolingly. "I'd trust that McIverson feller about as far as I would anyone, and that sister of his is a perfect lady."

"Lady, eh?" Maria retorted. "I guess she's plenty decent all right, but what good is she? You've never heard of her doin' any work, have you?"

"Well, she's a musician, I understand," Pap said, taking up the defense. "And she's learnin' to paint pictures."

A deep frown covered Maria's features. "Pshaw! What good will that ever do her? If she expects to get married

and have a home of her own, she's got to learn to cook and keep house. The girls are neglectin' that nowadays."

"Maybe she figures on hirin' someone to do it for her," Pap conjectured. "If they can afford it, that's all the better, they can devote their time to other things."

"Huh! You make me plumb sick at times, Josiah!" Maria said with a look of repugnance.

"What's become of Lem? I ain't seen him for a coon's age?"

Maria shrugged. "Lem's brokenhearted; he has quit comin' here, won't even work for us any more. Josie is too busy to go anywhere with him . . . She used to be mighty glad to get the chance, and unless I'm badly mistaken, she will be again."

"Lem's a plumb fool." Pap spat disgustedly. "He and Josie are not suited to each other. Josie's ambition; she wants learnin' while Lem is dull and lazy."

"Humph!" Maria ejaculated, with disgust plainly showing in her face. "If that gal ain't careful, she'll be learnin' things which are to her detriment. I'd like to know why Lem ain't suited to her. They were raised up here together, and both had about the same amount of schoolin'."

"He's got such queer ways and a jealous disposition, that's why," Pap returned. "He'll never make any woman happy."

Maria turned on him fiercely: "Aw shucks! You make me tired talkin' about happiness and the like, just as if that was all that was important. To be able and willin' to work is the main thing. When a gal starts gallivantin' around and neglectin' her work, she just naturally becomes no account, that's all."

Pap eyed his sister reproachfully. "I can't see but what she is doin' as much work as she ever did," he protested. "The only difference I can see is that she goes about her

work with a little better spirit than she used to. I noticed her just the other day hummin' *'The Missouri Waltz,'* with her hands in the wash tub up to her elbows. A young person must have a little pleasure before they can do good work."

Maria brushed the matter aside. "Well, time'll tell, Josiah," she said briskly. "I maintain that runnin' around at night makes folks triffin'. You believe just the opposite; we'll wait and see who's right about it."

The purr of a motor was heard, and shortly the McIverson car stopped at the gate. Josie alighted, and came running into the house. Her face was flushed with happiness.

"Oh, Grandpap, I've had more fun!" She threw an arm about his shoulder. "We went for a boat ride up the river, and Farrel taught me to row."

"That's dreadful dangerous," Maria said with a deep frown.

"Dangerous, Aunt Maria? The river is full of boats." Josie walked to the mirror and put a stray curl in place. After much practice, and with many misgivings lest her Aunt Maria hatefully comment on her altered appearance, she took to copying Helen's style of arranging her hair. So far, she had not said a word about it.

Pap patted her red cheek affectionately. "You're growin' like a weed, and gettin' better lookin' ever' day."

"Huh!" sniffed Maria, lifting her eyebrows. "Remember the old adage. If I was you, I'd get that dress off and put on somethin' that covered my body. It sure is surprisin' how folks dress nowadays. They're a heap more interested in what goes on their back than they are in learnin' to work."

Josie could see that her Aunt Maria was more critical than she was before she went away, but she was glad to have her home again. She at least wasn't tied down so close. She realized she could never be able to have her own

way about anything. Her aunt was so set in her ways there was no changing her. After all, it didn't matter, she reflected. She did wish, though, that she would take into consideration that she was young and needed some recreation just the same as other young people her age. She was tempted, at times, to openly rebel and do as she pleased, but her better nature always triumphed, and invariably she found herself doing her duty.

"What's the matter, Aunt Maria, don't you like this dress?" she asked. "I think it's beautiful."

Maria gave her a sharp glance. "I might if there was a little more to it," she said critically. "The way it is, you're a disgrace."

Refusing to be hurt by her aunt's criticism, Josie turned to her grandfather. "You don't think so, do you, Grandpap?"

"I don't see anything wrong with it, looks mighty cool and comfortable to me," Pap appraised.

Josie seated herself at the old piano and played one of his favorite tunes.

"If you're through with your foolishness, you can go in the kitchen and start supper," Maria said impatiently. "You're not worth much for anything else."

Thus admonished, Josie went to her bedroom. She exchanged the pink dress for a somber and curious one of dark cotton material. Hearing the rattle of stovelids, she hurried to the kitchen.

Maria turned on her with flashing eyes. "Another clean dress!" she raved. "Why didn't you put on the one you wore yesterday; it was plenty fresh. Washin' wears clothes out quicker than anything."

Pap, plainly miffed by Maria's lamentations, took his hat and cane and wandered off to the barn.

A fierce anger began to burn within Josie. The moment she entered the house, her aunt started complaining. That she simply delighted in making her feel humble and miserable was plainly obvious. Sometimes she wished she'd use other weapons of torture and give her tongue a rest.

"I wish you weren't so cross, Aunt Maria," she protested. "We should be kind to each other."

Maria waved her away with a hateful look in her face. "Don't start preachin' to me, gal, I hear plenty of that from your grandfather!" She looked as if she would liked to have smacked her into docility.

Josie's features contracted into a look of profound repugnance. "I might as well have my say as you, Aunt Maria." Her voice became independent. "After all, this is as much my home as it is yours."

They stared at each other in fierce, watchful hostility.

"Huh! You don't earn your salt!" Maria said in an embittered tone.

"You can't say that and be truthful about it," Josie argued. She had finished peeling the potatoes, and was slicing them into the skillet to fry.

Maria, kneading dough, looked up. "Slice 'em thin and put in plenty of salt." With dexterity, she molded the dough into biscuits and placed them in a greased pan. She opened the oven door, shoved the pan of bread inside, and slammed it shut with a bang. She made a hurried trip to the cellar and returned with a fresh shoulder of meat. She cut off a few large slices and placed them in a heavy iron skillet to fry.

A large red rooster walked up on the back porch, flapped his wings, and crowed vociferously.

"Shoo!" screamed Maria. "I reckon we know there's plenty of company comin'." She shook her apron at him.

"I don't know who could be coming, Aunt Maria."

"Don't worry, there'll be one of the McIverson's here before tomorrow night," Maria said scornfully.

"Well, what of it, Aunt Maria?" Josie said angrily. "I reckon they can come whenever they want to."

"That's what you think!" Maria said stiffly. After holding her gaze for a moment, she added: "Don't you smell your potatoes burnin'?"

Josie swallowed her wrath and went on about her work. She felt that it was extremely hard for her to live her religion in an atmosphere of hate and selfishness.

CHAPTER X

A STEADY rain had been falling for the past two days, and Farrel and Helen were cooped up indoors. The hills were blotted out, and the river was a raging torrent. All the glory of the beautiful sunshiny days was quenched. Helen, simply from a longing to have something to do, examined volume after volume of her brother's library. She wore a long white linen smock for the weather was exceptionally cool for that time of year.

Farrel, too, was delving into books, trying to glean some information regarding the European cuckoo: he wished to compare it with the American species.

Finally, Helen threw her book aside, and rose to her feet. "Gosh, but you're dull company on a rainy day!" she said.

Farrel shot a mischievous glance at his sister. "That's just what I was thinking about you," he jibed, and walked to the window. "Rain! Rain! Will it never stop?" he added.

"Of course it will," Helen smiled. "It always has. I like a rainy day occasionally. It teaches us we can't always do as we please; that we have the elements to reckon with."

Farrel did not reply but stood staring wistfully out the window.

"Do you know whom I have been thinking of today, Farrel?" Helen said eagerly.

"Some sheik you met in college, I presume," he returned indifferently.

"No. I've been thinking of your old flame Winifred Cole. Do you ever hear from her?"

Farrel was in no humor for conversation, and raising his brown eyes, he replied crisply. "No, in fact, I had forgotten the old girl."

"Winifred hasn't forgotten you, Farrel, and she never will. I think I shall write and ask her to come here for a while."

"I wouldn't bother," Farrel said nonchalantly.

By noon, the sky grew brighter, the clouds broke, and for a few moments the sun shone. Farrel donned his boots and set out for the woods. "This is better than being cooped up indoors," he muttered to himself.

The woods had come to life once more, a flock of sparrows were flitting merrily about in some willows, blithely talking among themselves. They plainly showed their cheerfulness at the returning warmth and brightness of the day.

A woodpecker soon set up a noisy hammering which echoed up and down the river. Farrel kept craning his neck until he caught sight of him. He was black all over his body with a red skull cap. He was assiduously boring into a live tree for grubs.

While Farrel was busy taking down notes, he heard someone approaching. He looked up and saw Lem Akery walking in his direction with his head down and a mean look in his face.

When Lem saw him, he stopped suddenly and stared at him strangely, almost inanely.

"Well, I guess I've got you where I want you at last!" he said threateningly. "I reckon it's about time that you was gittin' out of Plunkett Valley, and the sooner the better!"

Undisturbed, Farrel said coolly, "And who are you, may I inquire, who has the authority to order people to leave the country?"

Farrel's skilled poise and ready words seemed to upset Lem. He spat angrily. "You know who I am all right; I don't live far from here. We've had about enough of you

fellers from the clubhouse comin' around and meddlin' into the affairs of the neighborhood." He stood digging the ground with the toe of his shoe.

Farrel smiled patiently. "Just why have you taken such a dislike to me, young man? Have I harmed you in any way?" He rose to his feet and leaned against a tree.

Lem was hard as nails. He stepped up in front of Farrel, stubborn and hostile.

"Well, what business have you got goin' with one of the girls in this neighborhood? What does a man of your type care about one of our girls?" he scowled.

Farrel studied him for a moment. "Oh, I see," he said, with an understanding light in his eyes. "You're jealous; let's sit down and talk things over."

Lem's eyes were raging, his face violet. "I reckon I'm all right standin'," he said angrily.

"I suppose you have reference to Josie going with me to the social? Gee, but I enjoyed that! She and I are merely friends; she has been helping me with my work."

"There's danger in that, sir, and I'm warnin' you to stay away from her."

"I have no desire to take the girl away from you, we are merely friends." Farrel's voice was suppressed.

Farrel's calmness infuriated Lem. "We don't allow any strangers to horn in where they don't belong in this valley! I'm warnin' you to leave Josie alone!" he yelled, shaking his fist under Farrel's nose.

Quick anger brushed Farrel's face with color. "So that's a threat, is it?" he demanded sharply.

"Call it that if you want to," Lem snarled.

Farrel drew in his breath sharply. He felt that he had stood about all a man should stand from a tough like Lem.

"Why look here, you nut, what right have you got to be telling people what to do? Moreover, what right have you

to lay claim to a sweet girl like Josie? She is no more like you than water is like wine. Now I wish to inform you that I shall stay here in the valley just as long as I wish. Furthermore, I will go with Josie anywhere she chooses to go with me, and I shall ask you nothing about it!"

Lem's eyes suddenly turned green, and he seemed to lose all control of himself. His hat slid off, revealing a tangled mass of red hair. Lowering his head like a bull, he lunged at Farrel, knocking him to the ground. The two men rolled over and over in the leaves. Farrel was on the bottom, but not for long. He kept pounding at the back of the boy's head and was soon able to gain the upper hand. Lem fought with dogged persistence, but his opponent was too quick for him.

While the fight was in progress, Josie walked up and stood staring at the men terror stricken. She knew that Lem's enmity toward Farrel had been increasing since the night of the social, and she had been fearful that he would start trouble. She tried to speak, but her tongue was dry. Her fingernails dug into her palms.

Farrel, after delivering what he hoped would be a knock-out blow, sprang to his feet, his face ghastly white, his mouth set.

Seeing Lem on the ground with his eyes closed, Josie hurried toward him, her blue eyes wide and tragic. Stooping she tried to raise his head. Sensing he had fainted, she let out a cry of anguish.

"How could you do it, sir?" she said, staring at Farrel, and slowly stifling the quick anger that coursed through her.

Farrel looked at her with something hurt and startled in his rich brown eyes. "I'm sorry, Josie, but the boy attacked me. I had to defend myself."

Seeing the ghastly look on Lem's face, Josie turned cold. She stared at Farrel again, then for some unexplainable reason, started to run. In another moment, she was half way up the hill, running madly. Suddenly everything went black before her eyes. In her mad dash to get away from the scene of the fight, she had run into a tree which had knocked her down.

When she came to herself, Farrel had her head pillowed on his knee, and with his handkerchief was wiping away the blood which oozed from a bad scratch on her forehead. She pulled away his hand and sprang to her feet.

"I'm not hurt, not bad, sir," she said, feeling of her forehead. "You'd better run for your life or Lem'll kill you when he comes to himself. He's not right in his head, honest he isn't!"

Farrel's face bore the trace of a smile. "Anyone could see that; no normal person would leap upon a man like he did me."

"You'd better be careful," she warned. "Lem's just like a stubborn mule; when he once gets anything into his head, there's no getting it out. You'll have to be on your guard after this or he'll do you harm."

"I think I can take care of myself, Josie," Farrel assured her. "Let me take you home, you've received a severe shock."

Josie tugged at his sleeve. "He was lying there looking so white, do you suppose you could have killed him?" Her lips trembled.

"I'll worry myself sick wondering what is going to happen next!" she said apprehensively. "I fear that Lem has mighty bad blood in him; his pappy was mean, they say. Grandpap told me that he killed a man once."

"I don't doubt it in the least," Farrel said. "The boy would have killed me if he had had a chance. He took me for a weakling, but I guess he learned a few things."

"You mustn't fight any more," Josie said almost tearfully. "Lem's not responsible for his actions when he's mad. I know his mother; we've been neighbors for years. I'd hate to see him get into any serious trouble."

"You run on home, Josie," Farrel said, laying a hand on her shoulder. "I'll wander back and see if our friend has come to himself yet."

She stared at him stunned. "It'll take him an awful long time to get over this," she said. "He's just as sneaking as they make 'em."

Farrel made his way back toward the river where he had had the encounter with Lem, but the boy was nowhere in sight. He was greatly upset over what had happened, and could still feel the effects of the severe blows he had received.

He resolved from that day on he would use every means in his power to keep Josie from falling into the clutches of the scraggly youth. That Lem expected to marry her some day was plainly obvious.

When he reached his cabin, he told Helen of the attack.

"Why, Farrel, he might have killed you!" she said excitedly. "The girl must be saved from him. Unless she complies with his wishes, he's liable to do her harm," she said thoughtfully.

Farrel walked the floor in great agitation. "He's desperately in love with her and insanely jealous. Just think what her life would be if she married him. It's a shame the way her education has been neglected. She's bright and intelligent and has the making of a fine and noble woman, but she'll never have a chance."

Helen folded her arms. "Isn't she sweet, and isn't it a treat to run across a character like her nowadays?"

"Yes, there is something unusual about her and outstanding," Farrel agreed. "One can never tell what she's thinking."

"She has plenty of intelligence, and her manners are excellent for one raised in such surroundings. I was touched by the look in her eyes when I showed her a little kindness."

Farrel's brow deepened. "She lost her parents when she was ten years old, and has been reared by that cross old aunt of hers."

"You can tell by the look in her eyes that she is hungry and starved; full of yearning for the human touches of life. She greatly appreciates what we have done for her," Helen said sympathetically.

"She has always wanted to go to school in Hill City, but her grandfather has never been able to bear the expense. We must get her out of the way of Lem Akery if we possibly can."

Helen's eyes widened. "I'll tell you, we might help her find a place in Hill City where she could work for her board and room while attending school."

"That's a good idea," Farrel said interestedly. "I'll speak to Mr. Wilkes about it, and unless I am mistaken, he will fall right in with the plan."

"I don't suppose you would injure his pride by suggesting such a thing?"

"Not that fellow," Farrel said confidently. "He's blessed with more wisdom than the average man you meet. Uneducated, of course, but a great philosopher, and his heart is as big as a barrel. I'm very fond of him, and he has taught me many things."

"He has been nice to me," Helen said.

The clubhouse gong announced that dinner was ready. Farrel locked his cabin, and accompanied by his sister, climbed the hill.

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The following morning, Farrel was up at an incredibly early hour. He stole away to the forest as soon as he had had a bite of breakfast. A cardinal twitted a sleepy greeting, and before many moments had elapsed, the woods simply rang with melodious music.

He kept walking until he reached Sunnyridge. Seeing Pap leisurely sawing wood in the back yard, he walked towards him. He was almost upon the old gentleman before he saw him.

"Up rather early, aren't you, Mr. Wilkes?" Farrel asked pleasantly.

"Well, good-mornin', stranger!" Pap greeted, leaning the saw against the sawhorse and proceeding to fill his pipe. "I'm usually up by five. The first thing I do is milk, then turn the cows out to pasture. The cool of the mornin' is a good time for sawin' wood." He lifted his eyes and scanned the horizon. "There's a heavy bank over in the southeast, reckon we're goin' to have some more rain. There was a new moon last night and you can nearly always expect a change in the weather when she gets full and switches back ag'in. I've watched that time and ag'in and it never fails."

The dog came up and licked Farrel's hand.

"Hello there, Shep; you're a friendly boy." Farrel patted him on the back of the neck.

Pap looked on smiling. "He has taken a likin' to you for some reason or other. He don't make friends with every-one so quickly. I've seen him tear out at folks like he was goin' to eat 'em up."

"I never have any trouble making friends with a dog," Farrel said. "I suppose it's because I am fond of them."

"I've got a new calf this mornin'," Pap said proudly. "It's a bald-face, the pertest little feller you ever saw. Would you like to see it?"

"Oh, yes," Farrel returned interestedly.

They walked to the barn where the new-born calf was lying in a stall beneath its mother.

"Come, Flossie," Pap patted the mother on the hips. "You're not at all proud of your baby, are you?"

The mother stamped, and held her head caressingly toward her offspring.

"It's wonderful how proud they are of their young," Farrel remarked.

Pap raised the calf to its feet and held his arm around its neck.

"It's perfect, all right," he said, examining it closely.

"Yes, a beauty!" Farrel agreed.

"I've got another cow that'll be fresh next month," Pap informed. "If we was closer to market there would be good money in milkin'."

Farrel's eyes moved from one object to another.

"It must be interesting, Mr. Wilkes, to have your own place where you can make a living from the soil, and where you can raise vegetables and flowers and watch them grow."

Pap look amused. "Well, it's rather hard-sleddin' at times, but we ought to be thankful, I reckon, that it's no worse."

"Hundreds of people in the city would consider Sunnyridge a veritable paradise after being tied to a machine all day."

Maria's harsh voice interrupted them. She came around the house driving a flock of little chicks.

"There's a hawk been after my chickens, Josiah!" she lamented, then sighting Farrel, she added: "Good-mornin', sir."

Josie, with a kettle in one hand and a dishrag in the other, appeared at the kitchen door. She beckoned for Farrel to come closer.

"What about Lem? I've been worried sick," she said nervously.

"Don't worry; he's all right," Farrel assured her. "He was gone when I got back last night."

"I didn't say anything to the folks about it," she said confidentially. "They're sort of fond of him, you know. I feel like I was to blame for it as I have encouraged him by allowing him to take me places. I'm going to ask Parson Willoughby to have a talk with him."

"Think no more of it," Farrel advised. "That will probably be the last we shall hear from him."

Pap Wilkes came up, and Josie went back to her work.

"Could you come into the timber with me this morning, Mr. Wilkes?" Farrel asked.

Pap paused thoughtfully for a moment. "Well, I reckon I can. I've been layin' off to go for quite a spell. I'd like to see the river. I'm not very swift on foot though; we'll have to take our time."

The two men made their way toward the timber. It was quiet when they entered; not a bird voice could be heard.

"Where are all the songsters, I wonder?" Farrel remarked.

"They're probably havin' a jubilee up the river somewhere," Pap returned. "I've watched 'em doggone little creatures time and ag'in, they do that sometimes."

Farrel eyed his old friend interestedly. "The feathered fraternity keep me guessing continually, Mr. Wilkes; even the tiny wren is quite an enigma. I have known them to rear two or three broods in a single season. The more I study their habits, the more amazed I become. Each species it seems to me, have their own traits and characteristics set apart from the rest."

Pap's eyes showed keen interest. "They're as much different as we human bein's are, I reckon," he said in a

quavering voice. When they reached the river, he added: "She's up some, I see. I hope she don't get out of her banks ag'in this year."

The water was running swiftly downstream, carrying considerable driftwood along with it.

Suddenly, a regular symphony of voices reached their ears from down the river.

"Listen!" Farrel said, his face beaming. "The party is over and our feathered friends are returning."

A faint tapping was soon heard overhead, and a flicker set up its quaint, "*Quitu! Quitu!*"

"Listen to that!" Farrel soon had the bird under observation.

The flicker was apparently amusing himself by the sound that came from his tapping. His head was gray with a black streak below the eye, and a scarlet band across the nape of his neck. His breast was a pale, pinkish brown, and was divided from his throat by a black crescent.

"This bird business is quite a study, I reckon," Pap said amusedly. He had been watching with what eagerness Farrel observed their every movement.

"It is indeed, Mr. Wilkes," Farrel said with considerable enthusiasm. "The flicker is one of the species that has me baffled; they build their nests in the hollow of a tree and rear their young in a dark hole. I suppose they feel that they are more secure from interference in raising their flock."

Pap chuckled. "I reckon they know best how to do it, sir. I haven't studied 'em close enough to get on to their ruses, but I've wasted a good many years of my life which I might have put to good use by studyin' somethin'."

Pap's mind appeared to wander off into a reflective mood, and Farrel respected his silence.

"Ain't it strange how we waste our time?" Pap resumed. "The years fly by and nothin' accomplished. I reckon it's

all in how we get started off in life ; if we get the right start, we're all right, otherwise we're liable to get into a rut and stay there."

"I believe you're right, Mr. Wilkes," Farrel said thoughtfully. "You've had a wonderful opportunity to study and observe, living here so close to nature. In my opinion, there is nothing quite so interesting as a forest alive with nature's lively songsters."

A cardinal, a picture of joyous faith and contentment, in a tree above, let out a "*chip!*"

Pap's eyes scanned the treetops. "Gosh, it's wonderful what a feller can hear out here if he'll just listen, ain't it?" he remarked, as a dozen different bird voices chirped away. "Josie appears to be mighty fond of birds," he added. "She gets it from her mother, I reckon."

Farrel turned and gave his old friend his full attention.

"Josie is a very unusual girl, Mr. Wilkes, exceptional in every way, and possesses a keen intellect. My sister and I were talking about her yesterday, and thinking how fine it would be if she could attend school this fall."

Pap scratched at his chin, then ran a thoughtful hand through his thin gray hair.

"Lack of funds to educate that gal has been the greatest disappointment of my life," he confessed. "I have been intendin' to send her to Hill City to school ever' year, but the crops have been so poor, I couldn't afford it. She's a good English scholar, you've probably noticed that she don't talk like the rest of us."

Farrel leaned closer. "My sister and I would be willing to help her, Mr. Wilkes, that is, if it wouldn't hurt your feelings. I'm sure that Helen could find a place in town where she could work for her board and room while attending school."

A look of sadness came into Pap's eyes for a moment, and his hands, bony and shrivelled, gripped his cane tighter.

"It would be mighty hard to get along without her company, but I'd sure like for her to go."

She is very devoted to you, Mr. Wilkes," Farrel said animatedly. "Make her happy by giving her an education and it will enrich her life immeasurably."

"Her mother was awful anxious for her to get an education. From the day the child was born, she spoke of sendin' her off to school when she grew up. I reckon all parents are like that."

"We almost have to have a certain amount of education nowadays, before we can appreciate life," Farrel said earnestly.

Pap's eyes watered. "Well, I've never had much of it, I'll admit. I'm an old man now, and my life is about finished. I've missed a heap, I expect."

"You've been blessed with a great many things, my old friend. A broad outlook on life, and a kind heart, for instance."

After remaining in the forest for an hour, Farrel accompanied Pap back to Sunnyridge. They stopped at the gate and talked for a moment.

"Tell your sister I would greatly appreciate it if she will look for a place in Hill City where Josie can earn her board and room while attendin' school this fall," Pap said seriously. "I'm glad you brought up the question."

Farrel placed a hand on Pap's shoulder. "I'll speak to her about it this very evening, and I am quite sure she will be able to help you."

"I reckon your comin' to this valley has been a godsend to us," Pap said in parting, his throat tight as he uttered the words.

Farrel leisurely made his way back to the clubhouse. He liked Pap Wilkes; he knew the old gentleman was a Christian through and through.

CHAPTER XI

THE HOUSE in which Lem and his mother lived was a small, three-room affair, painted white, shaded by a low-hanging elm tree with half its branches resting upon the roof. It was a humble dwelling, with its background of wooded hills, made picturesque by its unique setting. A large unpainted barn, and numerous odd-shaped buildings stood in the rear.

With her slender body garbed in a faded old blue dress, her gray hair combed straight back and done in a knot at the back of her head, Tildah Akery was out in the yard working among her flowers. Cornflowers and marigolds bloomed in profusion near the house, and hollyhocks lined the garden fence.

Tildah was interrupted by the arrival of Nora Plunkett. Nora wore tan slacks and a white shirt, and her hair was up on curlers.

"Are you busy, Mrs. Akery?" Nora asked.

"No. Accordin' to my horoscope this is an unlucky day for me so I haven't tried to do much; probably couldn't accomplish anything if I did. Come on in, did you want your fortune told?" Her blue eyes flashed.

"Yes, please," Nora said, following her into the house.

Inside the house, the walls were prettily papered, and the floors well varnished. A bed, a dresser, a table, and a few chairs comprised the furnishings.

They seated themselves at the table, and Tildah laid the cards out face up, talking all the while.

"Here you are," she said, pointing to the queen of clubs. "Look at that jack of hearts trailin' you. It begins to look like he's goin' to be the one and only man in your life."

Nora flushed. "I wonder if that could be Harold?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. You're not goin' to win him without some difficulty. There's a blonde after him, too; see that queen of diamonds?"

"Oh!" gasped Nora. "I know who that is."

Like a clairvoyant possessed with great psychic powers, Tildah read Nora's fortune from the cards, weaving mystery and romance into it.

When she finished, Nora rose to go, and loitered on the porch.

"Why do you keep this horseshoe nailed to the door with a rabbit's foot dangling from it?" she asked curiously.

"They bring me good luck," Tildah informed. "Didn't you ever hear of that before?"

Nora shook her head.

"Did you know that Friday falls on the 13th this week?" Tildah asked. "It always fills me with dread for my husband died on that date."

Nora, looking at her mysteriously, said, "Well, I must go. I didn't have anything to do this afternoon so I thought I'd run over and see you. Good-by!"

Lem came in the house when Nora left with a glum look in his face. He was an only child, and fatherless, which made the bond of affection between mother and son stronger. Tildah's every interest centered around him, yet she was sensible, and knew that some day he would want to get married and have a home of his own. She knew that he was fond of Josie, and sensed that something had happened to cause a rift between them. She couldn't get him to talk. The past few days he had been in a strange mood, so strange that she sat for long intervals watching him, studying his face.

"How about that money that Pap Wilkes owes us, Ma?" Lem inquired. "Has he paid you yet?" His face bore a serious look.

"No, and I doubt if he ever will," Tildah said, accenting her words. "The last installment of interest hasn't been paid either."

Lem's jaw set itself firmly. "Well, Josie is wearin' a heap better clothes than the rest of us, and since she has taken to runnin' around with 'em folks from the clubhouse, I believe if I was you, I'd ask Pap to pay it."

"I'll do that, Lem, if you want me to," his mother said thoughtfully. "I don't like the way Josie has treated you. I've seen your sufferin' right along. She's allowin' them folks at the clubhouse to make a fool out of her."

"Suppose you see Pap and talk the matter over with him. We can use the money all right. I'd like to trade my old car in for a better one."

"Well, I'll say we can use the money," Tildah said firmly. "I was a fool to let Pap have it in the first place when I knew there wasn't much likelihood of his payin' it back, but in time of sickness and death, a person just can't refuse a neighbor anything."

Lem moved restlessly about the room. "It took us quite a while to make it, and Pap ought to arrange to pay it somehow; even if he has to mortgage the place. We can't afford to give it to him," he said gloomily.

Tildah rose to her feet and with set jaw prepared to visit Pap Wilkes.

An hour later, clad in a plain black dress, she set out for Sunnyridge. Her mind was working furiously. It was no light matter for her to go to Pap Wilkes whom she had admired and respected for years with this request, but she was thrifty and felt that it was time he was paying her.

When she reached the house, she paused for a moment and as though to summon up her courage, then rapped on the door.

Maria greeted her with a welcoming smile. "Well, if it ain't Tildah!" she said loudly. "It's been quite a spell since you have been over here. My house is in a muddle today. Have a chair."

Tildah paid no attention to the warmth in Maria's greeting.

"I haven't long to stay," she said nervously.

Maria seated herself and eyed her neighbor closely. "You've got a new dress, ain't you?"

Tildah straightened up and raised her skirt just a trifle. "No, it's an old one that I made over this spring." Her manner was a bit impatient.

Pap came in from the barn with a radiant countenance, and greeted Tildah effusively.

"It's about time you was gettin' over this way," he said, with a friendly pat on the shoulder.

Tildah returned his greeting with but little feeling, and for a moment there was an uneasy silence.

"I came over to ask you for what you owe me, Josiah. We're needin' it pretty bad." Tildah spoke coldly with a tinge of sharpness.

Pap stared at her for a moment dumbfounded. A painful color swept to his forehead.

"Why, has anything happened, Tildah?" His voice was shaky.

Tildah folded her arms. "No, only money is scarce right now, and it don't look like we're goin' to raise much of a crop this year."

Pap regarded his neighbor gravely. "Money's plenty scarce all right," he agreed, his voice weak and woebegone.

"I wish you'd give us a little more time. It's been about all we could do here lately to make ends meet, much less pay any of the debts."

Tildah raised her head haughtily. Despite her efforts, she couldn't help speaking her thoughts.

"Well, Lem says Josie is wearin' better clothes than the rest of us," she said, a touch of sarcasm edging her voice.

Pap stared at Tildah for a moment, an incredulous look in his face.

"They've been given to her by the McIverson girl," he said humbly. "We're not spendin' any money that way."

Tildah, encouraged by the amount of initiative she had shown, said, "Well, if I was Josie, I'd be careful whose clothes I was wearin' around."

"She's young yet, and has a hankerin' after such things just like all gals do," said Pap apologetically. "Where's Lem keepin' himself now days?"

Tildah's eyes flashed. "He stays home most of the time. Josie don't make him feel much at home here any more. I don't like to press you for this money, but I'm caculatin' on buyin' me a new incubator, and it's goin' to cost a heap."

Pap rested his head upon his worn hands that were clasped upon his cane. Deep pain was reflected in his faded blue eyes.

"It's a shame I ain't been able to pay you," he said dejectedly. "The money was lent to me at a time when I needed it bad. We just ain't had a cent to spare for over a year now."

Tildah sat with tightly closed lips.

During the conversation between Pap and Tildah, Maria had sat as if glued to her chair. Finally, she arose, walked to the kitchen, but returned in a moment wiping dry hands on her apron. She stood gazing at her neighbor in astonishment.

"What's come over you, Tildah?" Her voice was crisp. "Ain't we always been the best of neighbors? You've told us time and ag'in not to worry about that money. You're liable to be needin' help yourself sometime. What's the real cause for this demand?"

Maria's straightforward question disconcerted Tildah, and she changed color.

"Well, Lem would like to trade in his car, and there's several things we could do with the money if we had it. It's an honest debt, and I imagine you are just as able to pay it now as you'll ever be." While she remained outwardly calm during the visit, she felt inwardly keyed to a high tension.

"I don't know for the life of me how we're goin' to raise it. Money is as scarce as hen's teeth around here," Maria said briskly.

"Lem and I have worked mighty hard for what we've got," Tildah said, without hardly waiting for Maria to finish.

The muscles beneath Pap's eyes twitched. There was a droop to the corners of his usually smiling mouth. "I'll do the best I can, Tildah," he said, the anger and pain in his face reflected in his voice. "We may be able to sell off a few apples. The Wine Saps and Ben Davis look good. The blueberries'll soon be ripe; we may be able to sell enough of them to pay the interest, but I don't know where my tax money is comin' from."

Maria daubed at her eyes. "I wouldn't make any promises, Josiah, one never knows what'll happen." Turning to Tildah, she added: "We've had the beatenest luck, I've lost over half my chickens, and the cows ain't been givin' any milk to speak of. I get so discouraged sometimes I don't know what to do."

Something like triumph glittered in Tildah's calculating blue eyes. "Well, think it over, and see if you can't raise part of it, anyway," she said, rising to go.

Pap, looking very white and stern, followed her to the door.

"I'm aimin' to pay you, Tildah, just as soon as I can," he said wearily. "Even though it's just a few dollars at a time."

Tildah nodded, and hurried away.

CHAPTER XII

MARIA was furious when her visitor left.

"I just knew that gal would be the ruination of us!" she moaned. "Josephine! Josephine!" she called from the kitchen door.

Josie was out near the barn watching some pigeons when she heard her aunt calling. She hurried to the house. Her Aunt Maria stood at the door, her face aflame, beckoning for her to come in. She stopped, suddenly shocked by the look in her eyes.

Maria's fists were clenched, her mouth set.

"Come in here, you bull headed, wilful child!" she said bitterly. "Your actions here lately have got us into trouble."

Josie glanced at her frantic aunt and her troubled grandfather questioningly. They seemed to be undergoing mixed emotions. She wanted to shriek but checked herself.

"What have I done now, Aunt Maria?" She drew away a little, a hurt look in her eyes.

"Done? Well, you've done plenty, I reckon," Maria stormed, nervously blowing her nose with her handkerchief. "Tildah Akery was just here demandin' the money that we owe her. They're put out over the way you've treated Lem. We may have to part with the farm to pay it."

The knowledge struck Josie with shock and pain, boring into her consciousness like an auger. Her grandfather was walking the floor with a crestfallen look in his face.

"I haven't mistreated Lem; I'm in no way to blame for it," Josie said sorrowfully.

"The gal's right, Maria," Pap interposed, wagging a baffled bald head. "She's not to blame." He dropped into a chair and fell into deep thought.

Josie saw how pale he looked and she was stabbed with sorrow to think how disappointed he must be in her.

Maria gave Josie a heavy disapproving look. "You've driven Lem to distraction by refusin' to go with him any more."

A sudden hot anger began to burn in Josie's breast. With her cheeks flaming, she countered with considerable spirit: "Lem's crazy, Aunt Maria, and I don't care anything about his company!"

"He's just as smart as he ever was," Maria said hotly. "You were mighty glad to have the chance to go with him before that McIverson feller came here. You'll no doubt live long enough to regret a great many of your actions, young lady."

"Don't blame her for everything that happens, Maria," Pap said reprovingly. His head drooped on his chest.

Josie was hurt by her aunt's words, and seeing her grandfather bent in grief, touched her deeply. She ran over to his chair and whispered, "Don't worry, Grandpap!"

Pap rose to his feet and paced the floor.

"It's no use for me to say anything!" Maria said hysterically, and suddenly she burst into tears. Beating the chair arms with her fists, she raved like a mad woman. "If I'd a had my way about it, you wouldn't have been runnin' around like you have this summer!"

Josie, completely unnerved from the unusual sight of seeing her aunt in tears, tried to comfort her.

"Don't cry, Aunt Maria! You're allowing yourself to get all wrought up over a very simple matter."

Maria waved her away. Nothing seemed to exasperate her more than being cheered up when she was in one of her moods.

"Just to think," she burst out, "your grandfather is gettin' old and will have to lose the roof over his head!"

Pap, who had regained his composure, said, "Quit worryin', Maria. Things usually turn out all right if we don't allow ourselves to get worked up too much over them." He patted Josie on the head and slumped into a chair.

"You still seem like a child to me," he said tenderly. "I can hardly realize that you're almost grown."

Josie sat on a stool and placed her head in his lap.

"I don't want you to have to suffer for the likes of me," he went on. "It ain't at all like Tildah to take a mean advantage of any one, but I reckon they're a right smart put out because you're not goin' with Lem. I wouldn't want you to go with someone you didn't care for, though."

Josie knew that Lem expected to marry her some day, but she feared that he was doomed to disappointment. If only he would snap out of his shell and be like other people things might be different, but he never would. Any girl he married would have to do just as he said or there would be trouble; she wouldn't be allowed to have any friends, and would have to live there with him and his mother the remainder of her days. She didn't relish the job.

She rubbed her grandfather's withered hand. "Just because we're neighbors is no reason why I should be expected to marry him, is it?"

"You're too good for the likes of him," Pap said earnestly. "If I wasn't so old and crippled up, I'd get out and get me a job at public work."

"That's just where the shoe rubs, Josiah," Maria interposed. "You're too old to work and if you ain't careful you'll lose every acre of ground you've got."

"I don't believe there's any immediate cause for anxiety," Pap said consolingly. "Things may break for us yet."

Maria's mind seemed to be working furiously. "Tildah'll live to regret the day she came over here so high and mighty demandin' her money," she said scornfully. "A new incubator, eh? Pshaw! That wasn't it at all, she just wanted to show off."

"Human nature is a funny thing and is subject to change, same as anything else, I reckon," Pap ruminated. "This old farm hasn't given us a crop for two years now. I suppose the taxes will lapse next."

There seemed to be nothing for Josie to say. She sat silent, looking sympathetically at her grandfather.

Maria, her eyes staring, moved her foot up and down nervously.

"We work plenty hard, but don't get anywhere," she said morosely.

"We might sell Old Flossie and her calf and raise some money," Pap said.

"What? Sell off the best milch cow we've got?" Maria snapped. "Where's our milk and butter comin' from, I'd like to know? I'd rather sell the colt than her."

Josie was on the verge of tears. "Oh, Grandpap, you wouldn't sell old Flossie, would you?" she said fearfully. "She's just like one of the family. I'd hate to see the colt go, too; we need another horse."

"How about the young filly?" Pap asked with moisture in his eyes.

Josie clasped her hands together tightly. "No, no, Grandpap, we must find some other way out." She felt that they were all as much a part of Sunnyridge as the trees that shaded the yard.

Pap coughed dryly. "Well, we can sell the calf, I reckon, and apply that on the debt. That will show Tildah we're tryin' to pay it."

Josie had been thinking fast. She rose to her feet and placed a hand on her grandfather's shoulder.

"Let's not think any more about it tonight, and maybe tomorrow we'll have some brand new ideas. Don't you remember what you said about a new day always brings us fresh courage?" She kissed his forehead and climbed the stairs to her room.

When she reached her room, she threw herself down on the bed and cried. Her grandfather's financial condition worried her. She finally decided she must make friends with Lem.

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Two days later, Josie, garbed in a freshly-laundered blue linen dress, set out for the Akery home. She was going partly to ask Lem to work for them the following week, and partly to establish friendly relations with their neighbors again. She hadn't told her folks about Lem's peculiar actions the past few weeks nor of the fight in the woods. She knew her Aunt Maria would take the wrong view of the matter. If she continued her friendship with Farrel and Helen, she knew she would have quite a battle on her hands. It was a question of choosing between them and the Akery family.

She walked slowly, and prayed for guidance. It was a delightful day, and she felt humble as she made her way across the meadow. She fell to thinking that maybe she hadn't treated Lem right. She stopped to gather a bouquet for Tildah. Perched high on a grassy knoll, a meadowlark was pouring forth its musical, "*Tseeu, tseeu!*" and bees were busy over the clover blossoms.

When she reached the Akery home, Tildah greeted her with the same warmth and friendliness that she always had, and Josie wondered if Aunt Maria hadn't misconstrued her recent visit to Sunnyridge. She could tell by the look in her face that she was glad to see her. The kitchen

was filled with the odor of baking muffins, and the floor glistened from recent cleansing.

"I was just wonderin' this mornin' if you wasn't ever comin' over any more," Tildah said, ushering her into the living-room and bedroom combined.

Lem was seated in the kitchen, his brows drawn, his firm lips set sternly, apparently nursing a grouch. He barely grunted when Josie spoke to him.

"Come on in here, Lem, and be sociable," his mother called, but he paid no attention.

Turning to her visitor, Tildah grabbed hold of her arm.

"I broke a lookin' glass this mornin'," she said dolefully. "D'you reckon there's anything in the old sayin' that it's seven years bad luck?"

"I wouldn't worry," Josie smiled.

Tildah moved her chair up closer and gossiped volubly. She never mentioned the money, but acted like she always had.

"Lem and I broke a pulley-bone the other day," she said confidentially. "Which do you suppose gets married first?"

"I'm afraid I could never guess."

"Lem, of course," laughed Tildah. "He wouldn't tell me what his wish was, but he put his portion over the door there, and you're the first one to pass under it." She slapped her on the back playfully.

Josie flushed slightly, but did not comment. She visited for a while, then rose to go. Hoping to get a conversation started with Lem, she stopped in the kitchen on her way out and asked him if he could work for them to following week.

Lem's face brightened a trifle. "I reckon I can; ain't much else to do right now. I have my own work up in pretty good shape." He rose to his feet and walked out the door with her.

This was just the opportunity Josie had been waiting for.

"I haven't been seeing much of you lately, Lem," she said companionably as they walked along.

"You ain't been worryin' about it, have you?" he replied, a bit shamefacedly.

She looked up with troubled eyes. "We've always been friends, haven't we?"

"Yes, but ever' time I've been over to your place lately, you was out somewhere with those folks from the clubhouse," he said somberly.

"I wish you knew Farrel and Helen, Lem, you'd like 'em," she said enthusiastically. "They've been awful nice to me. Suppose you get acquainted with 'em."

A shadow crossed Lem's face. "I don't care about knowin' 'em," he said harshly. "They're not our kind of folks. I'm afraid the likes of them ain't goin' to help you any either."

"You talk just like Aunt Maria," she said, rather provoked. "They can't help it because they're rich and educated. They're just human beings like the rest of us."

"I knew you'd stick up for 'em," Lem said sulkily. "The next time I clash with that guy, I'll fix him!" He had become so absorbed in the conversation, he had walked half way across the meadow with her.

Josie was shocked at his threat. In the back of her mind she was considering how best to handle him. She saw the stubborn implacable iron of his jaw and shivered.

"Shame on you, Lem, what would you want to harm Farrel for? He didn't want any trouble with you. You forced it on him."

"I reckon I'm jealous," Lem said, his voice shaky. "That McIverson feller has come between us; you're not the same toward me that you was before he came here." He looked at her appealingly, squeezing her arm.

Excitement began to show in spots on Josie's red cheeks.

"That's just your imagination, Lem; I'm no different from what I've always been. I'm still your friend, and intend to keep on being as long as you act right. But if you start any more trouble I'm through with you." Her voice was strangely shaken.

He stared at her glassily. "If you're the same as you always was, then why don't you marry me?" He seized her in his arms and kissed her roughly. "I love you better than anyone in the world!" he added, his voice rough with emotion.

The hot blood leaped into Josie's veins, and a sharp ache of fear pierced her heart. "Stop!" she cried. She was shaking uncontrollably. She struggled with all her might to free herself from his arms.

He clutched her arm fiercely, his nails pressed into her flesh. "Who's goin' to stop me?" she shouted. His face was red, his breath coming in quick gasps.

Something ignited and exploded in Josie. With almost superhuman strength, she battled with him and forced him from her. Her brain was in a muddle. She was conscious of her hatred of the dull man at her side and her fondness for Farrel.

Lem was panting from his exertions. He looked wild and dangerous.

"You're not goin' to turn me down for that McIverson feller, are you?" he blurted.

Unwaveringly she met his gaze. There were tears in her eyes and she felt weak all over. She knew that she could never yield to his love-making; the impulse to tell him so took hold of her like a drug. Her hand flew to her throat in quick excitement.

"I haven't turned you down for anyone, Lem," she said seriously. "In fact, there has never been anything between

us. You shouldn't be jealous of Farrel. He doesn't care anything for me only as a friend. I'm not foolish enough to think he'd ever want to marry me."

Lem's eyes lighted a trifle. "No, Josie, when it comes to gettin' married, he'll choose a girl from his own set." He moved closer and added: "I'd be willin' to marry you tomorrow if you'd let me!"

A tremor passed over her. Losing her self-control for a moment, she put her face in her hands and wept.

Lem kept talking, telling her of the new house he was going to build for her, painting it in bright and glowing colors; also the new car that he was bargaining for.

She stretched a hand in appeal. "I'm sorry, Lem, but I can't ever marry you because I don't love you!" It was a relief to get the words out of her mouth.

He came closer, his mouth curiously set, his eyes bulging.

She broke away in desperation. "Stay where you are, Lem!" she commanded with fire flashing from her eyes. "Don't you touch me again! We've been friends too long for you to act this way. Go home to your mother and tell her what a beast you have been!"

Slowly, like a dog that has been beaten, Lem raised his eyes to her face. "I'm not carin' a rap for anything after this!" he said ruthlessly.

Josie was fearful of what he might do next. Dazedly she lifted a hand to her mouth and bit her knuckles.

"You mustn't act like a fool, Lem!" she admonished. "You've always been a good boy — good to your mother and good to grandpap — be your age!"

"Yes, and has bein' good got me anywhere with you?"

"Well, acting like a brute won't get you anywhere!" she retorted with spunk.

Lem hung his head for a brief spell, then swung on his heel and stalked off in the direction of home.

Josie breathed a sigh of relief, and hurried home. She had never thought Lem capable of acting like he did today. He had given her the biggest scare of her life.

When she reached home, her grandfather looked at her curiously.

"What's happened, gal, you're as white as a sheet?"

She burst into tears. "Lem followed me half the way home, grabbed me and kissed me, and asked me to marry him!" she cried, sinking pathetically down into a chair.

"The hell he did!" Pap said agrily.

"I can't imagine what's come over Lem, Grandpap. He was always a little queer, but now his head is filled with all kinds of crazy notions. I told him I couldn't marry him because I didn't love him," she said with tears streaming down her cheeks. She rose to her feet quickly and moved toward her grandfather beseechingly. "You wouldn't want me to marry a man like him, would you?" She fell to her knees and buried her face in his lap.

"No, child, I just want you to be happy, that's all!" Pap said tenderly. His worn face became heavy with brooding.

"What in the world can be the matter?" Maria gasped, entering the room from the kitchen, her eyes snapping through horn-rimmed spectacles.

Josie decided to tell them everything. She was tired of harboring secrets in her heart. She gave them every detail of the fight in the woods, told them of Lem's bitter jealousy of Farrel, and how she feared that he would kill him.

"Well, I'll be darned!" Pap exclaimed in great agitation, and started pacing the floor. "You'd better stay away from him, gal, or he's liable to be doin' you bodily harm."

Josie's heart was bursting within her when she finished. "Im sorry, Grandpap!" she said, with a sudden inclination

to more tears. "I wish I could love and marry Lem, but it's impossible. I don't care enough for him, besides he acts queer sometimes, like he wasn't right in the mind; I think he's dangerous."

Pap nodded an understanding head. "Anyone right in their mind wouldn't act like he's been actin'."

A strange light shone in Maria's eyes and her face was working.

"You may change your mind about Lem, Josephine!" she said harshly. "You're plenty young yet, and I've known more than one girl to change her mind. Lem's a mighty good boy in spite of all you've said against him. You could do a heap worse. He's been driven to desperation by the way you've treated him."

Josie's eyes blazed. "When it comes to getting married, Aunt Maria, I'll decide that!" she said with flaming cheeks.

"That love business don't last long," Maria said emphatically. "After you're married, you've got to settle down to makin' a livin'."

"You talk like marriage was a business arrangement of some sort."

Maria lifted her eyebrows. "Well, a business arrangement is sometimes better than a silly love match. One thing you can say for Lem, he's substantial."

"After him losin' his head and jumpin' on another man in the woods?" Pap said.

Maria shrugged. "I don't know that I blame Lem much. That McIverson feller has caused trouble between them. Josie never has anything to do with Lem any more. You've spoiled the girl to death, Josiah, and you'll live to regret it. I maintain that when she marries, she should marry one of her own kind of people, and I don't know of anyone more suited to her than Lem."

Josie listened with only half her mind to her aunt's opinions. Like a frog in a rain barrel, she was always croaking.

Pap was walking the floor again. "I'm not in favor of her marryin' Lem now," he said gravely. "Rearin' children by such a man as that, never!"

Maria was greatly upset. "There'll come a day when she'll wish she had married Lem," she flashed. For lack of any other task to occupy herself, she took up the scissors and started cutting paper.

"Josie ain't goin' to marry anybody yet for a while," Pap informed. "She's goin' to school this fall."

Maria stiffened. "Send her off to school and spoil her a little more, eh? I'm goin' to leave this place before somethin' happens. All these years I've worked and helped you make a home for the child, and now my word don't count for anything. I'm not goin' to stay here and see that girl's life ruined by associatin' with that trash from the clubhouse!"

Josie rushed toward her aunt and fell on her knees before her.

"Oh, Aunt Maria, how can you say such things! Haven't I got trouble enough?"

Maria was weeping voluminously.

Pap, looking disgusted, walked out of the room.

Maria, regaining her composure, looked at Josie. "I'm not tellin' you what to do, but if you'd marry Lem, it would ease the burden on your grandfather. He's gettin' more feeble ever' day."

The next few days Josie went about her work tormented by indecision. Seeing her grandfather failing in health and burdened with worry was eating her heart out. She had cried in her room many nights; she tried to think clearly, but inside her brain was only confusion. She wondered

what life would be like married to Lem. Marriage is living together day in and day out, she thought. How could she stand up beside Lem, promise to take him until death do us part?

She tried to view the question from all angles. One voice kept whispering into her ear, "Perhaps it would be better for you to marry Lem," but another voice said, "Don't tie yourself to a man you don't love."

She finally decided that if marrying Lem would help her grandfather, she was willing to make the sacrifice. Her love for him exceeded everything else.

It was a wild plan, but she determined to go through with it. She would show her Aunt Maria that she was not a child, but a person old enough to assume responsibility.

CHAPTER XIII

THE following day while rambling in the woods, Josie saw Lem sprawling on the ground, under a tree, as if resting. She knew he didn't see her, and she couldn't resist the temptation to watch him for a few moments. "What can he be doing here?" she asked herself. She could tell by the expression on his face that something weighed heavily on his mind. A dog stopped and smelled around him, apparently eager to make friends, but he paid no attention. Two cardinals, in a tree overhead, were fairly splitting their throats with cheerful music, but if he heard them, he gave no evidence of it. She presumed that evil and murderous thoughts were surging through his mind, shutting out everything that was beautiful in life and nature.

A wave of pity swpt her. He loved her very much, she knew, and possibly she could learn to love him in time.

She moved a trifle closer, her body pressed against a large walnut tree which seemed to return her embrace.

"A penny for your thoughts, Lem!" she yelled.

Lem leaped up with surprise written in his face. "Howd'y," he said. "I wasn't expectin' to see you here."

Josie fumbled with a piece of bark. "I wasn't expecting to see you either, Lem, but I'm glad you're here." Her voice had a ring of sincerity in it. "Why aren't you working today?"

Lem hung his head for a moment and stood with his hands clasped in an attitude of profound and dejected meditation.

Finally, he raised his eyes and straightened himself. "I was up there workin' in the field and I got to thinkin' that my life was all drudgery with nothin' to look forward to, so I just dropped everything and started walkin'. I'm not myself this mornin'."

A noise in the leaves back of Josie attracted her attention, and upon investigating, she discovered a crippled pewee. A stray shot had severed one of its wings and it was unable to fly. She picked up the bird and stood it on its feet in the palm of her hand.

"Look, Lem," she said sorrowfully, "someone has been wicked enough to cripple this poor darling! It will be left here now when the others migrate; I'd better take it home with me." The bird was a somber olive color, with a vest of greenish gold, and two olive stripes on its wings. A tiny ebony-tinged cap adorned his head. She watched it closely,

While she examined the bird, Lem remained awkwardly reticent. A thrush mounted the choirloft and sent forth a rippling wildwood song, but he didn't appear to hear it.

If only he were alive to what was going on around him, Josie thought. She stood on first one foot and then the other, hoping he would break the silence, but he didn't appear to be in the mood for conversation.

Moving a step closer, she said humbly: "Do you really want to marry me, Lem?" She didn't know how she ever got the words out. Her throat throbbed with a dull ache.

Her words only seemed to add to Lem's discomfiture. "Not if you don't love me," he replied gloomily, staring somberly at the ground.

She stared at him, baffled. The earth beneath her feet was carpeted with wild flowers and she stooped and gathered a few, trying all the while to summon enough courage to carry out what was in her mind.

"I might try, Lem," she said. "There's a heap of difference between liking and loving; you're more like a brother to me than anything else."

Josie leaned against a tree, holding the crippled pewee in one hand and the flowers in the other. He's making it hard for me, she thought.

"I can't say that I love you, Lem, without saying something that isn't true, but I might learn to in time." Something inside her was trembling hysterically.

Lem raised his head with a startled look in his eyes as if trying to determine the sincerity of her words.

He finally recovered his voice. "Are you serious?"

She met his eyes and nodded, "Yes."

His eyes brightened. He took hold of her hand and pulled her down to a seat beside him. The blue overalls he wore were rumpled and dirty, and he smelled of the barn. He put his arms about her and kissed her but she was aware only of disappointment, and experienced no emotion when his lips touched hers. In fact, his very touch was repellent.

"No other man could ever love you like I do!" Lem said rapturously. "I love your Aunt Maria and your grandpap. Forgive me for actin' like a brute, I couldn't help it. I love you madly!"

Once she was free of his arms, Josie relaxed. She looked at the river. Her face had lost its glow. There was in it now an earnest, steadfast quality as passionless as the tree that shaded them.

"I know you do, Lem, and I'm sorry I've caused you so much trouble and worry."

Her words seemed to give him fresh courage. "Then you'll marry me real soon, I reckon?" he burst out loudly.

"Yes, Lem," Josie answered expressionless.

Her magic words seemed to transform Lem into his former self, and his face beamed with a new light. He was so elated, he took his harp from his pocket and played

"Let Me Call You Sweetheart," putting plenty of vigor into it.

They talked for a long while, making plans, then Lem went back to work.

When he had gone, Josie seated herself on a log and gave herself up to gloomy silence. A great wave of relief swept over her that she was alone. Whirling thoughts rushed through her aching head like roaring machinery. A feeling of desolation oppressed her. If she married Lem, she didn't feel that she would ever be happy; it would be the end of all her fond hopes and dreams. Still, with conditions like they were at home, there didn't appear to be any other way out. She had always wanted an education so she could do something for herself, but everything was against her.

Busy with her thoughts, she had not heard Farrel who came walking up and stood looking at her appraisingly.

She was so taken by surprise, she scarcely knew what to say or do.

"Pardon me for being an eavesdropper, but I came up unexpectedly from chasing a flock of bluejays, caught a few fragmentary snatches of your and Lem's conversation which aroused my interest, and I couldn't help listening to the rest." Then he asked the monosyllabic question, "Why?"

Josie's face turned very white. "Oh, Farrel, why did you have to come at this time?" she said sorrowfully. "I've made up my mind to marry Lem. You see grandpap owes Lem's mother some money and we can't pay it, so Aunt Maria seems to think if I marry Lem, it will all be in the family."

"What! You marry that beast? Ridiculous!" Farrel's eyes blazed.

Josie's shoulders contracted with the beginning of a sob. She tried her best to keep from breaking down, but despite

her efforts, tears formed in her eyes, overflowed, and ran down her cheeks.

He stooped and placed an arm about her tenderly. "Think what you're doing, Josie," he said, his eyes drinking in the picture she made, sitting on the log with the crippled pewee in her lap. "You are thinking of marrying this stupid youth who is no more like you than cotton is like iron."

She struggled for composure and looked at him with the wide-open eyes of a child.

"Lem's not so bad, Farrel, he's — he's — well, you wouldn't understand." She wished he wouldn't question her action. She wasn't very proud of what she had done.

"Listen," Farrel said, giving her hand a tight squeeze. "If you marry that boy, you'll be making a grave mistake. I can't believe your grandfather to be a man who would accept such a sacrifice from you."

"Grandpap doesn't know anything about it, Farrel. He wouldn't want me to do anything that would make me unhappy, but he's not able to work and needs Lem's help. Oh, well, it's done, and there's no getting out of it now," she said resignedly.

"Tell me something, Josie, do you love this man?" Farrel's brown eyes looked deeply into hers.

Josie thought his hand shook a little and suddenly she realized how upset he was.

"No, I don't love him, I might as well be honest about it. He seems more like a brother to me than a lover, but perhaps I'll learn to love him in time."

"I don't believe you would be well mated," Farrel said earnestly.

The unaffected sincerity of him impressed her. "Possibly not, but it would help grandpap. He's getting old and helpless. It doesn't matter about me!"

Abruptly and bravely as though moved by something within, he took both her hands in his.

"I have come to think a great deal of you and your grandfather, Josie, and I can't stand idly by and see you make such a serious mistake. You must never marry a man you don't love. Your life would be ruined. There must be some other way to solve this problem."

Josie's knees trembled. She was aware of an agony which seemed to penetrate into every part of her body.

"It doesn't matter, Farrel," she said despairingly. "I guess Aunt Maria is right about it. Lem's my own kind of people. I've enjoyed you and Helen so much; you've given me a glimpse of what real living is like, but I wasn't born to it. You'll be leaving one of these days, and I'll have to go back to the old life again."

He looked at her gravely. "Getting married isn't just a trivial thing like having your breakfast," he said seriously. "Your whole future is involved. If you marry Lem, you'll discover after it's too late what it means to be married to a man you care nothing for. There are hundreds of such cases in the courts."

It came over Josie with a terrible clarity that she had blundered, but she felt that her decision was made.

"I couldn't go back on my word," she said weakly.

"Why, there's nothing binding about it," Farrel said quickly. "Better that than make a mess of your life. Why not go to your grandfather and tell him what you've told me?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't do that," she said tremulously. "He would object to my marrying Lem just to help out. I'd rather he'd think I was doing this because I wanted to."

Farrel looked at her unbelievably. "Such devotion is admirable, Josie, but there is too much sacrifice involved," he said. "Let me help you out of this. I'll lend your grandfather the money to pay off his indebtedness. In return, he can allow me to make a few agricultural experiments on the old farm."

"I've promised Lem that I'd marry him, Farrel. I couldn't go back on my word, besides there'd be trouble if I did."

"Forget it, girl, you have nothing to fear from him," he said assuredly.

Josie wavered and procrastinated. "Tell me, Farrel, why do you want to do this?" she asked humbly.

"Because I feel a deep interest in your welfare. I know that if you marry this boy, you'll regret it."

"But I have to marry somebody, don't I?"

"Of course, but when you do, marry someone that you really love. Listen, hurry home and tell your grandfather what I have proposed, and if it's satisfactory with him, both of you get ready to make a trip into town. I'll be over there in an hour with the car."

"All right, Farrel, if you think it best," she said with relief. It was hard to refuse him anything since he and Helen had been so kind to her, besides he wasn't a man who would take "no" for an answer.

When Josie reached home, she was happy to find her Aunt Maria had gone to the Crossroads store. "What a break!" she muttered to herself. She bandaged the pewee's crippled wing, and placed it in an old cage to convalesce. Then, she sought out her grandfather and told him of Farrel's plans.

"Well, if he ain't the beatenest feller!" Pap exclaimed, then gave way to a prodigious laugh. "Maria'd just about have a fit when she finds out we're gone, but we'll fool her for once."

Josie didn't tell him about her engagement to Lem, but merely that Farrel wanted to let him have the money in exchange for the use of his land.

"Hurry, Grandpap, put on your best clothes," she urged.

In a happy state of anticipation, which going somewhere always induced in her, Josie helped him with his necktie.

"I wish you had a new one," she said. "This one is threadbare."

"It'll do this time," Pap replied. "I have always felt uncomfortable with one of them dang things on."

"Thank heavens, you're ready at last!" Josie exclaimed.

Josie put on a little make-up, so eager was she to make a good appearance. She was glad her Aunt Maria wasn't there to see what was going on. She put on her blue skirt and white blouse, and the only pair of silk stockings that she owned.

A motor was heard ascending the hill near the house, and Josie laughed joyfully like a child.

"That's Farrel!" she said gleefully.

When the McIverson car stopped at the gate, Pap, looking spick and span in a blue suit, his collar uncomfortably high at the neck, stepped out to greet his visitor. The two men talked for several minutes in low tones. Farrel told Pap about Josie's determination to marry Lem, not because she wanted him, but because she believed it would help her folks.

"I'm sure you wouldn't accept such a sacrifice from her, Mr. Wilkes," he said finally. "A marriage with Lem would ruin her life."

Pap appeared to be greatly upset over what Farrel had told him. There was a mist in his blue eyes.

"I'm not in favor of her marryin' him," Pap said emphatically. "I sure appreciate your steppin' in and helpin' us out."

So great was Josie's rapture at getting started, she couldn't find words to express to Farrel how pleased she was. He opened the back door of the car to let her in, then took his place at the wheel beside Pap. They were soon on their way. It was a delightful day, golden and bright and colorful. Josie sat straight and silent, her eyes shining and her cheeks flushed with pleasure and relief.

The road led past meadows and groves, yellow fields of harvest, and orchards of luscious fruit. As they rode along, Josie thought that the valley looked like a delicately painted picture in water color. Thrushes and bobolinks were singing in the trees by the roadside.

Pap seemed to delight in telling Farrel of the changes that had taken place in his time, and how they used to have to get along in the old days. Farrel lent a sympathetic ear to his reminiscences.

Lying so peacefully between two hills, the flourishing little town of Hill City came into view. Josie's blue eyes widened as they sped into the village. It was a pretty place with many rambling old houses with vines climbing the porches, mellowed by years of weather, and framed in high arching elms.

Farrel brought the car to a stop in front of the bank, and he and Pap alighted and entered the building. Farrel drew a check for the full amount of Pap's indebtedness with interest, this they deposited in Tildah Akery's name.

The sun was low on the hills as they returned, giving softer beauties to the extensive scenery.

When they reached the Akery farm, Farrel stopped, and helped Pap to alight from the car. Josie's heart beat fast as she and Farrel waited for him. . . .

"Well, if it ain't Pap Wilkes!" Tildah's surprised voice said. She stood in the doorway with mouth sagging, eyes staring. "I never expected to see you this far away from home ag'in; I didn't think you'd be able."

Pap's eyes were twinkling. "Surprised you, didn't I? I've been to town to pay off that debt I owe you; it's there in the bank for you, interest and all, and here's the deposit slip to cover it."

Tildah's eyes opened wide with astonishment. An odd embarrassment tinged her cheeks a dull red. She took the

paper from his hand and scrutinized it well, while Pap looked on amusedly.

"How in the world did you manage it?" she quizzed, glancing toward the car where Farrel and Josie were seated. "As long as Josie and Lem are goin' to get married, I reckon I'll just give them this money for a weddin' present."

"There ain't goin' to be any weddin'," Pap informed. "Josie ain't goin' to marry anybody yet for a while; she's goin' to school."

Tildah gasped. "Why, Lem seems to think its all settled."

"You can tell him for me that it's all off; I have other plans for my granddaughter. We'll have to be gettin' on home now, Maria didn't know we was goin' anywhere."

Tildah's eyes popped out again curiously. "Didn't know you was goin'? How'd you keep it from her?"

"She wasn't at home when we left," Pap explained.

Meanwhile, Maria had arrived home from the store and found the place deserted. Fussing and fuming around in a great nervous strain, she appeared to be on the verge of collapse. Going in and out of the house, she slammed the doors fiercely.

The car drove up, Pap and Josie got out, and Farrel called good-by to them.

When Maria heard the car, she came hurrying from around the house, her apron fluttering in the wind. White and shocked looking, she stared from one to the other.

"Land of Goodness!" she gasped. "Where in kingdom come have you two been dressed up like that? A weddin' or funeral, which?"

Pap, looking enormously worried, stumped up the steps to the porch.

"Neither one, Maria, we've been to Hill City."

Maria straightened herself, her eyes registering unbelief.

"Hill City? My stars! What did you mean by goin' off and leavin' the place like this? I couldn't imagine what had

become of you." Looking at Josie closely, she detected the make-up on her face. "Huh! Just about what one would expect," she aded angrily.

"I wanted to look decent for once in my life, Aunt Maria," Josie returned sharply. She could see that their furtive trip to town had greatly upset her aunt, but she didn't care much.

Shifting her gaze to Pap, Maria shouted, "Who told you to put on that shirt? I'll have to launder it ag'in now before you can go anywhere. It seems to me you use mighty poor judgment at times."

Pap's hair was disheveled, and his necktie badly out of place. With his hands, he smoothed the wrinkles in his shirt bosom.

"I don't reckon it's soiled much, Maria."

Maria, her shoulders thrown back, continued her quizz. "You ain't told me what you have been doin' in Hill City?"

Pap raised his head and looked straight into her eyes.

"We went to town to get the money to pay off Tildah Akery."

Maria threw up her hands. "Well, did you ever!"

Pap appeared to be enjoying her exclamations of surprise. He was quite composed. He led the way into the house.

"And where in thunderation did you get the money?" Maria exploded.

Pap gave her all the details. "Now just calm yourself a little till you've had time to think things over. Josie was goin' to marry Lem because she thought it would help me financially. I got wind of what was goin' on and stopped it. She's not goin' to marry any man unless she loves him. Mr. McIverson offered to lend me the money to pay Tildah and I took him up. I'm goin' to lease him three acres by the river."

"Well, sufferin' cats!" Maria yelled angrily. "I wonder what sort of scheme that young man is tryin' to work to get possession of this farm?"

Josie looked at her Aunt Maria disgustedly. "He did it mostly to help us out, Aunt Maria," she said.

"Huh! You believe that, eh?" and suddenly Maria flew into a terrific rage. She chased the dog out of the kitchen, and scolded the chickens on the back porch. "You dassent set much store by his words, likely as not he's tryin' to beat us out of what little we've got."

Pap kept following Maria from one room to the other.

"You always take the wrong view of things, it seems," he muttered.

Maria's eyes blazed. "If you ain't a bigger fool than I ever thought you was! Borrowin' money from a perfect stranger; it's ridiculous!"

"He's not much of a stranger any more, Maria, we've known him about long enough to start callin' him friend."

"Huh!" Maria sniffed. "Better find out first whether he is a friend or not. You'll live to see the day when you'll regret this!"

Pap said complacently, "Mabe so, Mara, but if I do, I'll suffer the consequences. I wish you could have seen Tildah's eyes when I handed her that deposit slip. I reckon it got her about the worst that anything ever did."

"We've lost their friendship now, I reckon, and we won't have a neighbor in the whole valley," Maria said scornfully. "How we're goin' to get along without some help from Lem is more than I can tell you. Well, summer'll soon be over and them clubhouse folks will be leavin'; I'll be mighty glad of that!"

Josie stared at her aunt in amazement, wishing she possessed a few human qualities.

"Oh, Aunt Maria, how can you say such things when they've been so nice to us?" she cried, tears blinding her eyes.

"I've seen a lot of 'em come and go, gal, and the most of 'em are just so much trash!" Maria shook her head vigorously.

"I don't believe you're capable of likin' anyone, Maria," Pap said critically.

"Never mind, Josiah, you'll be sorry for some of the things you've said. If you two are through gallivantin' around, you can get into your old clothes and go to work."

Josie pulled herself together as well as she could and went forlornly about her work.

Once Josie was in bed that night, all the fears she had put out of her mind kept crowding back. She couldn't help wondering what Lem would do when he found out that she had changed her mind about marrying him.

Before going to sleep, she prayed earnestly for Lem; prayed that God would help him to straighten up and be a man.

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN the car left, Tildah went back into the kitchen and began washing dishes. Her mind was working furiously. Pap's unexpected visit had filled her with surprise and dismay. While she was glad to get the money, she couldn't help feeling bitter toward him for interfering with Lem and Josie's affair. Her heart ached for Lem for she knew the news would be hard for him to take.

She was interrupted in her thinking by Lem, who came barging in from the barn like a stiff breeze on a quiet day.

"Who was in that car?" he asked excitedly.

Tildah pushed the soapsuds off her fingers and indignantly straightened an aching back. She turned to her son with a look of pity in her face.

"It was Pap Wilkes," she informed, handing him the deposit slip. "He had been to town to pay what he owed us. It's there in the bank, interest and all."

Lem looked at the paper and gaped. "Who was with him?"

Tildah could see that he was greatly upset over the matter and she scarcely had the courage to tell him.

"Josie and some stranger was in the car but they didn't get out; must have been that feller from the clubhouse. He was well dressed and had a pleasant lookin' face."

Lem's eyes turned from gray to green. He slumped into a chair.

"Must have been that McIverson feller hornin' in ag'in where he don't belong!" Lem muttered in rage.

"Pap didn't tell me but I imagine it was from him that they got the money. I've got some bad news for you, Lem. I mentioned to Pap that as long as you and Josie was goin' to get married, that I'd give you the amount of the debt for a weddin' present. He said there wasn't goin' to be any weddin'; said Josie wasn't goin' to marry anybody yet for a while; said she was goin' to school in town this fall."

Lem was so enraged over the news, he lost all control of himself. He clenched his fists, stamped his foot, and swore all manner of evil against Pap and Farrel McIverson.

Tildah's heart went out to him in deep sympathy. "Now look here, Lem, get hold of yourself," she admonished. "It ain't a goin' to do any good for you to rave around like a mad man. You'll have to take it." Her face was white and rigid. She knew he had a nature similar to his father's, and she was worried.

"You don't think I'm goin' to set here and let that feller pull one like this, do you?" Lem growled.

"What else can you do, Lem?"

"Well, I can do a plenty, you just watch me." He went into his bedroom and took a revolver out of the dresser drawer and loaded it.

Tildah was frantic. "What are you goin' to do with that gun?" she asked excitedly.

There was an insane look in Lem's face. He made no reply.

His mother tugged at his sleeve, "Answer me, Lem, what are you goin' to do with that gun?" she repeated.

Lem looked at her for a long moment with the eyes of a maniac.

"I'm goin' gunnin' for a feller!" Lem flashed. "And when I get through with him there won't be anything left but his carcass."

Tildah, crying and screaming, struggled with him, trying to wrest the gun from his hand, but without success. "Crazy nut, you ought to have more sense than to kill a man! Don't you know what they'd do with you if you did?"

"I ain't carin' a hell of a lot!" Lem retorted. "Get away now, Mom, leave me alone in this!"

Tildah shrank back, quivering. "No, I won't!" she cried. She ran to the front door, locked it, and put the key in her pocket. Then she rushed to the kitchen door, placed a chair against it, and sat down. "You're not leavin' this house tonight, do you understand?"

Tildah would have given everything she possessed if she could have contacted Parson Willoughby, but she had no telephone. Her mind flashed back to the day when Lem was just a child; she thought of all the love she had lavished upon him, and now he wanted to be a killer. She was crushed with sorrow.

Lem looked at his mother with profound disgust. He opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again without saying a word.

"Remember I'm your mother, Lem, and entitled to a little consideration. You should have more respect for your father's memory than to want to commit a crime. Set down there a while and calm yourself! You'd better think twice before you go out gunnin' for somebody. There's a heavy penalty for that. You're all I've got left and I can't stand by and see you make a fool of yourself."

Lem was so mad he broke down and cried. "Just when I thought ever' thing was settled this had to come up!"

His mother looked on pitifully. "I don't believe Josie cares enough for you to marry you, Lem," she said. "You'd better get interested in some other girl."

Lem rose to his feet and paced from one room to the other.

"No," he said angrily. "Josie's the girl I want and I'm goin' to have her. I'm not goin' to allow a stranger to come into this neighborhood and cause trouble between us. I'll kill him first!"

"You're not goin' to get this gun so you may as well shut up!" Lem said harshly. He rushed to the door and tried with all his might to push the chair away, but Tildah held it fast with a death-like grip.

"You're not goin' out, I'll tell you!" she screamed. "If you do, it'll be over my dead body!"

All evening, she kept close watch, trying to console him. His anger rose and dropped like the temperature. She used coercion and affection and every means she could think of to get his mind off murder.

"There's quite a bit of money in the bank now, Lem," she said slowly. "Would you like to trade in your car?"

Lem's face brightened a trifle. "I want a new one next time," he replied. "I'm tired of monkeyin' with these old rattle-traps."

"If you'll give me that gun, we'll go into town tomorrow and see what we can do."

"No!" Lem said quickly.

The hurt look in his eyes was like stinging flesh. "Go to bed, Lem, you'll wake in the mornin' feelin' different," she advised.

Finally, Lem went into his bedroom, took the gun from his pocket, shoved it under his pillow and started to undress. His mother walked the floor uneasily. She prayed for her son as she had never prayed before.

When she heard him snoring, she slipped into the room, took the gun from under his pillow, and hid it. Then she undressed and went to bed.

CHAPTER XV

HOW WOULD you like to go to school in Hill City this fall?" Pap asked his granddaughter a few days later.

They were seated on the back steps of the old house at Sunnyridge watching a flock of sparrows.

Josie's eyes bulged and she stared at him questioningly. "I'd love to, Grandpap, but can you afford it?" she asked eagerly.

Pap filled his pipe, lit it, and took a few puffs. "I reckon we'll manage somehow. I've made arrangements for you to stay with a lady there and work for your board and room. Are you willin' to do it?"

She gazed at him with astonishment. "Why haven't you told me this before? The suddenness of it has upset me."

"Helen McIverson made the arrangements," he confessed. "We wanted it to be a surprise for you."

Josie's eyes were thoughtful. A sort of abiding fear of leaving the familiar for the unknown, caused her to turn cold for a moment.

"Why, yes, Grandpap, I'd be willing to do anything to get to go to school," she said enthusiastically.

"One reason why I didn't say anything about it was because I knew Maria would be against it. This woman that you are to stay with is a Mrs. Hall, and she lives in a fine house. The only thing left to do now is to get your Aunt Maria reconciled to it."

Maria soon returned and went about the packing methodically.

"Now there's your Sunday dress, Josie, I wouldn't wear it only on the Sabbath," she cautioned. "The darker ones will do to wear around the house. You're goin' to have to be mighty savin' to make 'em last through the school term. I wanted to make you another dress out of that dark material of mine, but I never got around to it."

Josie was much pleased by her aunt's amiability, but she definitely did not want any more dark dresses.

"That's kind of you, Aunt Maria," she said.

The following morning Josie was up at an incredibly early hour. This was to be the most eventful day of her life; she was leaving for school.

That afternoon, the sunlight of a warm September day filtered in through the open window, bringing cheerfulness to the living-room at Sunnyridge. Josie sat deeply absorbed in the pages of a book which Farrel had given her. It was one of his own compositions on Bird Life, and was autographed. It was beautifully illustrated in colors with life-like photographs of many of the feathered species of New England.

Finally, she laid the book aside, and walked to the open door and looked out over the farm. Always she had loved this place; but not until this day had she realized how much. The hills had never looked so pretty as they did that afternoon; the zinnias had never been so clear a pink, or the September sky so blue. Suddenly the thought struck her that she was leaving all this to go among strangers, people who had no interest in her welfare, and she felt sick at heart. She felt that things would never again be quite the same. Somehow, she feared that the ties that bound her to her grandfather and the old home would be irretrievably broken. Some day, she wanted to return and take up life where she had left off. She dreaded bumping up against

You'd freeze yourself to death in thin stockings this winter."

"All right, then, Aunt Maria, but I'll be the oddest looking girl in school. I will be anyway, though, I'm so old to start in."

Pap looked at his granddaughter reproachfully. "I wouldn't mind that, gal, one never gets too old to learn. It won't take you long to catch up with the rest. If I was you, I'd be mighty glad to have the opportunity."

"You're plenty young to go away from home," Maria interposed. "If not in age, then in your ways. It's not what's on your back that counts, either."

The next few days Josie was busy preparing for school. The little trunk, which had been in the family for years, and contained many odds and ends that Maria prized so highly, was brought out and emptied. The deed to Sunnyridge was in it, a lock of Josie's baby hair, and many old letters and papers, yellow with age.

"I'll declare, I don't know where I'll ever find another place to keep these things where the mice won't get in 'em," Maria remarked. "This old trunk has been almost as good as a cedar chest."

Maria insisted upon doing the packing herself, and Josie watched with interest. There were many of her old dresses that she would liked to have left behind, but her aunt insisted upon stowing them in the trunk.

"You'll want to take care of your health when you get up there," her aunt warned. "Wear plenty of clothes and don't expose yourself. I reckon it's plumb shameful the way the girls in town dress nowadays; they don't wear enough to cover 'em."

Josie managed to sneak in her box of cosmetics while her aunt was in the kitchen searching for something. She knew if she discovered its presence, she would fly into a rage.

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"That's kind of you, Aunt Maria," she said.

The following morning Josie was up at an incredibly early hour. This was to be the most eventful day of her life; she was leaving for school.

That afternoon, the sunlight of a warm September day filtered in through the open window, bringing cheerfulness to the living-room at Sunnyridge. Josie sat deeply absorbed in the pages of a book which Farrel had given her. It was one of his own compositions on Bird Life, and was autographed. It was beautifully illustrated in colors with life-like photographs of many of the feathered species of New England.

Finally, she laid the book aside, and walked to the open door and looked out over the farm. Always she had loved this place; but not until this day had she realized how much. The hills had never looked so pretty as they did that afternoon; the zinnias had never been so clear a pink, or the September sky so blue. Suddenly the thought struck her that she was leaving all this to go among strangers, people who had no interest in her welfare, and she felt sick at heart. She felt that things would never again be quite the same. Somehow, she feared that the ties that bound her to her grandfather and the old home would be irretrievably broken. Some day, she wanted to return and take up life where she had left off. She dreaded bumping up against

a world which she knew so little about. Still, God is everywhere, she thought, and it was the only opportunity she had ever had to further her education.

She knew but little about what subjects she would be required to carry in high school; she was going to leave it all to destiny. There was no reason why she couldn't learn, others did.

Inactivity only enhanced her nervousness, and she decided that she must find someone to talk to. She would like to have shared her thoughts with her Aunt Maria; she wanted to ask her to be kind to her grandfather; to tell her just how she felt about leaving, but her aunt would misunderstand her.

She heard the sound of her grandfather's saw in the wood yard, and she walked in that direction. Pap appeared to be preoccupied with grave thoughts as he drew the saw back and forth. He was very dear to her; she would miss him. Without saying a word, she threw herself down on the ground and sobbed, hard, slow, heartbroken sobs.

Pap stopped abruptly and came toward her. "What's the matter, gal?" His voice was strangely shaken. "Has Maria been cross with you again?"

Josie shook her head, emotion had shut off her voice. She couldn't tell him that her heart was breaking because she was leaving him. After shedding the tears she needed to shed before she could become reconciled to going away, the cold, numb hurt inside her abated.

Pap sat down on the ground and looked at her sorrowfully. "We'll be lonesome around here when you leave, Josie," he said sadly. "It won't seem like the same place. I wish you knew how much you mean to me."

Josie rose to a sitting position and wiped her eyes. "I've been dreading to leave, Grandpap, that's why I'm so upset." She took his withered hand and rubbed it against his cheek. "I won't forget you, I'll make you proud of me."

Parson Willoughby stopped for a few moments on his way to make a call in the neighborhood.

"Well, Josie, I hear you are going to leave us!" he said, seating himself opposite her. He took a small Bible from his pocket and handed it to her. "Here, take this with you and read it often. Don't forget the One who makes everything possible."

"Thanks, Parson Willoughby, I'm so proud of it," Josie said eagerly.

"We are going to miss you here in the valley, but it's nice that you can go to school."

"It will be lonely at first but possibly I can adapt myself to new surroundings."

Farrel and Helen paid Josie a hurry-up call late in the afternoon to say good-bye and wish her good luck. Helen brought with her the sketch she had made of Sunnyridge. Josie went into raptures over it. She had watched her while she sketched it, but the finishing touches had improved it greatly. She looked at it with admiration.

"Look, Grandpap, there's old Shep lying on the step," she said eagerly.

Pap looked at the painting awe-stricken. "Well, I'll be hanged!" he exclaimed. "That's just as natural as it can be."

Maria smiled a trifle when she saw the sketch, but did not comment one way or the other. Josie kept watching her out of the corner of her eye.

When Farrel and Helen were ready to leave, Pap filled a paper sack with big red apples and gave them to Helen. "The choicest are for you," he said.

"Oh, thanks, Mr. Wilkes!" Helen said, gloating over the gift.

Farrel shook hands with Josie and told her good-by. It was the briefest contact, but through it she was conscious of him in every nerve and fiber of her body. She felt like she wanted to fall on his neck and kiss him.

Helen stooped and kissed her affectionately. Tears came to Josie's eyes.

"We're going to miss you," Helen said earnestly. "Try and be happy in school, won't you?"

Josie felt a warm glow of gratitude toward these good friends for all their help. . . . She laid a hand on Helen's shoulder and said in a tight voice: "I want to thank you and Farrel for what you have done for me."

By five o'clock, everything was in readiness for Josie's departure. Mrs. Hall was to send a car for her.

"There's just one more thing that I want to warn you about," Maria said briskly. "Be careful of the company you keep while you're away from home. Bad company can get anybody into trouble quicker than anything. You've been raised decent and I want you to stay that way."

"I'm not uneasy about that," Pap said. "She'll find the right kind of friends."

A few moments later, a large gray sedan stopped at the gate. Pap went out to see who their visitor was and was met at the gate by a gray-haired, pleasant-faced woman with blue eyes. Her slender body was clad in a lavender dress, and white oxfords covered her feet.

"I am Mrs. Hall," she said graciously. "Is this Sunnyridge?"

"Yes, this is the place," Pap answered, offering his hand. "I am Josiah Wilkes. Come right in."

Maria appeared at the door and gazed awe-stricken at the visitor.

"This is Mrs. Hall, Maria," Pap said by way of introduction. "Mrs. Hall, my sister Maria Wilkes."

"Howd'y do," Maria said bluntly. "We wasn't expectin' you to come in person."

Josie came to the door and stood for a moment speechless. The charming lady with the kindly face held her gaze.

"So this is Josie, is it?" Mrs. Hall smiled and shook hands with her. "I am so glad to meet you, dear. I thought possibly if I came myself and met your family, it would help me to understand you better." Her tone was almost maternal.

Josie warmed to her immediately. There was something about her that touched a tender spot in her heart. One look into her kindly blue eyes convinced her she had found a friend. For the past few days she had been conjuring things in her mind, even dreaming of the woman who was to play such an important part in her life henceforth.

"That wasn't a bad idea," Pap said, obviously pleased with the appearance of the woman. "The gal hasn't had much of an opportunity for schoolin' out here. I have been calculatin' on sendin' her to Hill City for the past two years, but I just couldn't afford it."

"She'll make good progress in town, I'm sure. We have good schools in Hill City. I taught there myself for years. I am very much interested in young people, and I'll make your granddaughter's interests my own."

"I'm hopin' she won't pick up the ornery traits of the rest when she gets up there," said Maria, who up until now had kept quiet. "She's got it in her head that she ought to have a lot of fine clothes to wear, but I told her it was all foolishness."

"Clothes aren't everything," replied Mrs. Hall. Then turning to Josie, she added: "Character is what counts, my dear."

While Mrs. Hall talked, Josie sat studying her face. She couldn't help thinking how composed she was, how easy it was for her to meet people. She wished she could be like her. Incredibly, she couldn't find anything to criticize. She seemed natural, with no pretentiousness about her. She could see her grandfather liked her.

"I'd appreciate it if you'll just take care of her like you would if she was your own daughter," Pap said earnestly.

Mrs. Hall promised that she would, and after visting for a while, suggested that if Josie were ready, they would start on their journey.

Pap and Maria loaded the old trunk in the back seat of the car.

When Josie walked out the door, she felt that she was leaving everything that was dear to her behind and going forth into a new world. Throwing her arms about her grandfather's neck, she wept bitter tears.

"This'll be the first time we've ever been separated, Grand-pap!" she said heartbrokenly. "Take care of yourself."

Pap's voice broke when he started to reply, and tears streamed down his withered face.

Turning to her aunt, Josie said, "Good-by, Aunt Maria!" and offered her lips.

"Don't bother about such foolishness, child, get in the car," Maria said, embarrassed at any show of affection.

When the car had gone, Maria returned to the kitchen and wiped her eyes with her apron. Pap seated himself on the veranda and went back to his dreams.

CHAPTER XVI

EXCITEMENT began mounting in Josie's veins, and her heart was thumping when Mrs. Hall brought the car to a stop in front of her comfortable looking home in Hill City. It was a large, two-story frame dwelling, painted white with green shutters, and a large veranda circled the house. The porch was lined with black and yellow canvas beach chairs, and gorgeous dahlias bloomed in profusion near the steps. Josie's fascinated glance missed nothing.

"Is this where you live, Mrs. Hall?" she asked, her eyes full of admiration.

Mrs. Hall smiled graciously. "Yes, dear, and this is where you are going to live for the next few months. D'you think you'll like it?"

"Oh, yes, it's grand!" Josie exclaimed in rapture.

They entered the house and Mrs. Hall led her up a winding stairway to a cheerful little bedroom on the second floor. It had prettily papered walls, and dainty white curtains with pink ruffles decorated the windows. Its homey warmth gathered her in with comforting security.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, her expressive face beaming with admiration. "I've never seen a prettier room. Can I have it for my very own?"

Mrs. Hall went to the window and raised the shade, allowing the sunlight to fill the room.

"Yes, for your very own," she said, obviously choosing her words with a view to their simplicity. "And you can

arrange the furniture to suit your own particular taste. I want you to feel at home here. I'll have Mr. Dutton bring up your trunk, and you can unpack and hang your clothes in the closet. My room is just across the hall from you." Her tone was genuinely warm and sympathetic.

Josie, touched by Mrs. Hall's kindness, began to cry.

"What is it, dear?" Mrs. Hall said, placing an arm about her.

"Oh, Mrs. Hall, you're so kind!" Josie burst out. "I've always wished that I had a home and a mother, and it looks like my wish is going to be fulfilled."

Mrs. Hall wiped a tear from her own eye. "I've always wanted a daughter. The great joy of motherhood has been denied me, and it has been one of the greatest disappointments of my life. I feel sure that you're going to be a comfort to me."

Josie listened attentively while Mrs. Hall talked, gratitude and worship shone in her eyes. She was telling her everything that she wanted to know without her asking questions.

"Come," said Mrs. Hall, leading the way into her own apartment. "You see I am quite old-fashioned. That dresser there was my mother's, and the other pieces are what Mr. Hall and I bought when we were first married." She moved about the room tidying it up with deft touches. A radio and a writing desk decorated one end of the spacious bedroom. "This is my den over here," she added. "I spend a great deal of my time reading and writing and listening to the radio. There is a good view from the window there, and in summer, the birds entertain me with their songs."

"It's lovely!" Josie exclaimed rapturously. "I'm glad you like birds."

"Come, dear, you can see the school buildings from this window," Mrs. Hall said. "The large red brick building over there is the high school."

Josie gazed at the colossal building in amazement. What a contrast between it and the Plunkett Valley schoolhouse.

Mrs. Hall led the way downstairs and showed her through the entire house. The long living-room was a picture of comfort; downy overstuffed furniture, a bookcase, and a large upright piano, comprised the furnishings. Good paintings hung on the wall. The dining-room, with a bay window embellished with a fernery, was the largest room in the house. The walls were lined with shelves contained china and glassware of all colors and descriptions. The kitchen, done in ivory and pink, was immaculate, and equipped with every modern convenience.

To Josie's surprise, Mrs. Hall had a pair of singing canaries which enlivened the place with their joyful songs. She was somewhat bewildered by the spacious house and luxurious furnishings but she supposed she would get used to it in time.

"I'm glad you have a large library," she remarked to Mrs. Hall. "I love to read."

"Help yourself, you'll find that reading will help you in your school work."

"Oh, Mrs. Hall, you're so understanding and all!" Josie said in a voice of appreciation. "I'm so glad that you're a Christian woman."

"You'll be a world of company for me, Josie," Mrs. Hall said earnestly. "The winters are so long and lonely, I need a bright face to cheer me up. Your trunk has been taken up. You can unpack now."

"Thanks, I'll do it right away."

How out of place this old trunk looks, Josie thought, as she carefully hung her dresses in the closet. When her task

was completed, and everything arranged to her satisfaction, she walked to the window, pulled the curtain back, and looked out. The sun was sinking in the west and the sky was red. In the yard below was a bed of late zinnias, their bright faces staring up at her. The attractive looking homes, the tree-bordered streets, all held her attention captive.

Mrs. Hall served them a late, but delicious dinner, from the electric refrigerator, and when the dishes were cleared away, they returned to the living-room.

"We're going to have such good visits this winter, Josie," Mrs. Hall remarked. "Since Mr. Hall died, I've been very lonely, and sometimes feel that life isn't worth living." Tears filled her eyes, and she rose and seated herself at the piano.

"Do you sing, dear?" she asked.

"I can sing hymns," Josie said eagerly.

Mrs. Hall picked up a hymn book which was lying on top of the piano. "Come sit beside me and sing, will you? I love hymns."

Josie was surprised at the ease with which Mrs. Hall shifted her hands over the keys. Fortunately, she had selected a hymn with which she was familiar and she joined in the singing.

"You have a sweet voice, Josie. I wish Mr. Hall could have seen you. He loved young people so much, especially students who were anxious to learn and get ahead. That is his picture hanging over there." She pointed toward a portrait that hung on the wall.

Josie looked at the portrait closely and curiously; the face of Edward Hall smiled down at her indulgently.

"It almost seems like he's speaking to me," she said. "He was a fine looking man."

"If only he could have lived," Mrs. Hall said sorrowfully. "My heart is buried with him. We spent so many happy evenings here together, just he and I. You can't know what it means to give up the one who is dearest in all the world to you!"

"I can sympathize with you," Josie said tenderly. "I'm an orphan, you know." She placed an arm about Mr. Hall. "I had forgotten for the moment, yes, you, too, have suffered. We can comfort each other in our loneliness. You'll pardon me if I sometimes dwell too long on my own troubles."

Josie told Mrs. Hall much of her early life that evening, and asked her many questions about herself. When bedtime came, they felt that they knew each other.

"You must feel at liberty to come to me at any time with your problems," Mrs. Hall said solicitously. "When you start to school you'll find that there are many puzzling things to face. You'll be strange, and you may suffer because of remarks from some thoughtless persons, but pay no attention to it. An education is what you're after; endure anything in order to get it."

When Josie retired to her little room that evening she felt a bit lonely. It was the first night she had ever spent away from Sunnyridge, and the task of moving, of coming to a strange place, had somewhat unnerved her. But the tasteful luxuries of Mrs. Hall's home made her feel that she was in fairyland. She loved the little ivory bed with its downy mattress, and the comfortable chairs with their bright cushions.

The last thing she did before turning out the light was to take a faded picture of her father and mother from her trunk and gaze at it longingly. It was her most precious possession.

"You'd be glad, wouldn't you, Mother dear, if you knew I was here?" she said softly.

The next day was Sunday, and Josie accompanied Mrs. Hall to church. The old brown stone building, situated on a prominent corner, seemed to welcome one with its doors flung wide open. Josie, unused to town churches, felt rather shy as she climbed the steps leading to the entrance. The moment she entered the large auditorium, however, her self-consciousness left her. A spiritual glow seemed to grip her when she heard the chimes, and later the organ music. She gazed admiringly about the room, and at the beautiful windows.

"You must sing, dear," Mrs. Hall whispered when the services began.

Josie was unfamiliar with the hymns, but she repeated the beautiful words. Soon, the fiery little gray-haired pastor rose to deliver the sermon, and words flowed from his tongue freely. Josie was impressed by his personality and forceful delivery. He stressed the fact that the majority of the people were growing too cold, too worldly, and urged them to have the love of God in their hearts which would make them new creatures.

"Did you enjoy the services, child?" Mrs. Hall asked when they reached home.

Josie had just been thinking of the beautiful service. "Yes, very much," she said earnestly. "I believe I could learn to like your pastor as well as Parson Willoughby."

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Monday morning, Josie enrolled in the Hill City high school. She thought the auditorium was the largest room she had ever seen. Her plain brown skirt and white blouse were a strange contrast to the gay dresses of the other girls. She had never felt so much out of place in her life as she

did that first morning. Shortly, a bell began to ring, and the room emptied rapidly. In the confusion of it all, she didn't know where to go. She wanted to ask one of the girls, but they were all in too big a hurry to pay any attention to her. She felt very stupid. Face blank, she made her way to the office where she was directed to her Home Room.

Miss Jurden's hair was totally gray, her face cold and haughty. She took Josie in charge and assigned her a seat in the back row.

Josie's cheeks grew red under a painful embarrassment. The feeling of inferiority was upon her like a disease. School seemed to be all routine work with everything human left out. Having a different teacher for each subject was confusing, and they appeared to be so busy that they had but little time to devote to any one student in particular. When they changed classes, she followed the others. She couldn't understand the routine, and when noon came, she walked behind a group until they dispersed on the sidewalk.

Seeing Nora Plunkett walking with two other girls, Josie ran toward her.

"Oh, hello, Nora, I am so glad to see you!" she said.

"Well, if it isn't Josie Wilkes!" Nora gasped. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm in school," Josie said, a trifle hurt by her friend's cold manner.

The two other girls whispered something to Nora, and looking Josie up and down, they went giggling down the street, leaving her staring after them.

Josie was stunned. She never dreamed that Nora would treat her that way. They had been brought up together. They had gone to school together, been in the same crowd all their lives until they came to Hill City. She had been a good friend to Nora and she simply couldn't understand why Nora felt above her.

A nostalgia for Sunnyridge gripped her with great intensity, and by the time she reached home, she was abnormally self-conscious, and imagined the whole school had laughed at her.

Mrs. Hall met her at the door with a smile. "Well, how did you make it, dear?" she inquired.

The tempest in Josie's bosom burst forth into tears.

Mrs. Hall placed an arm about her. "What happened, dear?"

Josie felt suddenly tired, and old-fashioned as a tallow candle. She wished she were back home with her Aunt Maria.

"It was all so strange, Mrs. Hall," she said seriously. "Nobody hardly spoke to me or told me how to get around. It's so different from going to school in the country. I saw Nora Plunkett, a girl from out our way, but she gave me the cold shoulder."

"She did, did she?" Mrs. Hall said sympathetically. "Oh, well, don't worry about it, we all have to go through that experience. While you haven't had the advantages which the others have had, I'll warrant that you can surpass them all. Come, lunch is ready."

Josie sat huddled in a chair, her appetite gone. Mrs. Hall's words brought some measure of comfort, but indignation flared in her overwrought imagination when she thought of Nora's insolence. The hurt to her pride was perhaps the worst of all. She had fancied herself smart and grown-up, but she must have appeared stupid and silly.

Following the meal, Josie, her heart banging with dread, returned to school. It was just a repetition of the morning session. The crowded schoolroom, appallingly noisy with the clatter of so many human voices, made her nervous. A need for help and encouragement took hold of her like a drug. She gazed at her Latin book and shuddered. Her

mind seemed to be a perfect blank, but she presumed if she concentrated hard enough, she would gradually master it. A feeling of cold failure, of not being able to take it, raced down her spine. By closing time, she was almost sick from mortification.

The first week of school was sheer agony. Self-conscious, she felt the other girls avoided her. But she realized her own actions and gloomy attitude may have had much to do with it. A terrible sense of failure and inferiority engulfed her. She was afraid of her teachers and avoided any personal contacts with them. When she saw groups of laughing girls in the hall, they aroused her envy. Sensitive and hurt, she did not speak to those in her Home Room for fear that they would snub her. They seemed to be so happy and gay, and had such lovely clothes, that she felt she could never be one of them.

Latin, Algebra, and English were her three solids. In addition to those, she had Gym, Glee Club, and a Study-Hall. Many times during the first few days of school, Josie planned to give it up and return home but wavered and procrastinated. Her courage came in guests and ebbed away again leaving her spiritless.

Mrs. Hall had a big house, and there was plenty of work to be done. Josie kept busy two hours after school and on Saturdays, cleaning and dusting.

Before many days, Josie's fighting spirit rose, and her homesickness was gone like a bird on the wing. "There is nothing wrong with my classmates, it's me," she told herself. "I must learn to mix with the rest." She hated herself for being so weak.

Anxious to rid herself of the loneliness that oppressed her, she endeavored to make friends with some of the girls; although they seemed interested only in themselves. To

wear good clothes, to attract attention, appeared to be the sum total of their aspirations.

In stubborn anger, she decided to stick it out. She would show them that she could learn ; that her mind was as good as theirs. She was fast acquiring confidence in herself, and it had suddenly dawned upon her that success or failure depended upon how much effort she put forth.

She labored over her assignments with great diligence, and with what help she received from Mrs. Hall, she was able to get off to a good start in each of her subjects.

CHAPTER XVII

MAGIC autumn had settled upon the Missouri hills. In the mornings, the valleys were filled with a heavy mist, and above them the slopes of the hills were covered with scarlet sumac.

Farrel and Helen were preparing to return to Northampton for the winter months. They were going to drive through, and Horace Allen was going to accompany them as far as Chicago where he had a position with the government.

Farrel had remained for the fall migration. For several days he had been watching the different species increase their consumption of seeds and insects; building up a reserve strength on which to draw in case of scarcity of food on their long flight. The bobolinks had left in mid-August, headed for the marshlands on the upper Paraguay river. Later, the flycatchers, the vireos, and warblers followed, a pageantry of beating wings.

The big news of the summer was that Helen McIverson and Horace Allen had fallen gloriously in love with each other.

"I never dreamed that I would meet the one man in all the world out here in these hills," Helen said to Farrel. "It's almost incredible."

"Possibly it was God's plan to bring you together," Farrel returned.

On this evening in particular, Helen and Horace had just finished a game of tennis and were wandering about the

clubhouse grounds. Helen was wearing a white linen skirt and a turtle-neck sweater of the same color. Horace's athletic form was clad in flannel trousers and a white polo shirt.

They came upon Farrel, seated beneath a tree, listening to a vesper sparrow peal its evening song.

"Hear that?" he said, motioning for them to be quiet. "Hear the soft plaintive notes of rest and peace?"

"How is my recluse brother this evening?" Helen asked, after listening for a moment. She was looking well. The few weeks spent in the hills had brought color to her cheeks, lustre to her eyes. She stood with one hand on Horace's shoulder.

Farrel turned and gave them his full attention. "Well, to be quite honest with you, I'm out of sorts because I am compelled to leave this charming spot which has such a hold on me."

Helen laughed, and turned to Horace. "He wants to live here permanently."

"Mother and dad were sold to this valley the moment they lit here," Horace said eagerly. "The climate is ideal nine months out of the year. I spend all my vacations here."

"It hurts me to think that I shall have to wait until spring before I can hear the song of the thrush again," Farrel said wistfully.

Horace threw himself down on the bench beside Farrel. "There is more to ornithology than one unacquainted with it realizes," he said animatedly. "Tell me something about this migration. To be quite honest with you, I have never given it any thought."

"Well, certain species begin leaving in August for a warmer climate. Others wait until September and October. Their journey often takes them as far as Central and South America," Farrel explained.

Horace's eyes widened. "Do you mean to tell me that they travel five and ten thousand miles across seas? I should think their little wings would play out on them."

Farrel's enthusiasm increased as he talked. "Oh, they're clever little creatures, and possess tremendous power of flight. They make brief stops for food and rest. They spend the winter in a warm climate, then when spring comes, they begin the return flight. If you watch closely, you'll observe new species arriving daily after March first. The bluebird is one of the first to show up and often makes his appearance in February. Of course, there are certain species that remain with us throughout the winter. The chickadee, the titmouse, and the downy woodpeckers are all-year residents. The bluejays and cardinals also remain, but keep themselves well concealed where watchful eyes cannot spy upon them until spring."

"I suppose I've been too busy studying Engineering to think of anything else," Horace said with a tinge of regret in his voice. "I need to get out and learn something about nature."

"You can't imagine how much I'm going to miss the clear pipe of the meadowlark, the sweet wild song of the scarlet tanager, and the beautiful notes of the warblers," Farrel said interestedly. "I expect to return here early in the spring so that I'll be on hand to greet them upon their arrival from the south. I have visions of a lodge of my own in these very hills where I can work and study to my heart's content."

Horace turned to Helen. "Shall I tell him of your new plans?"

Helen nodded.

"Helen has decided that after a short visit at home, she will return to Chicago and enter the Art Institute where we can be near each other."

Farrel smiled. "I wondered if she didn't have something like that in mind."

When Horace and Helen had gone, Farrel walked across the bridge into the edge of the woods. He seated himself on a tree trunk and listened to the sleepy twittering of what few birds there were left. Darkness gradually settled over the hills.

Suddenly, the report of a gun rent the air, and a bullet grazed his ear. He leaped to his feet in panic. It was some time before his mind would function properly, then it dawned upon him that this might be Lem's way of getting even with him for helping Pap Wilkes out of his financial difficulties. He might have known the boy would seek revenge in some manner, he reflected. That he would resort to murder was almost unbelievable. Josie was right, Lem was crazy, he told himself. The bullet had just barely touched the tip of his right ear, but it was bleeding.

He pondered his next move. He didn't particularly enjoy being in the woods at night with bullets whizzing around. He threw himself down on the ground and partly concealed himself among some bushes and waited. Lying in wait, unarmed, for a maniac with a gun wasn't a very pleasant experience, but he felt that if Lem showed up, he could overpower him before he had a chance to shoot.

A moment later, he was sure that he heard footsteps in the brush near the river. Soon, from out of the darkness, a dark form appeared creeping stealthily along, and as it came nearer, he could make out Lem's awkward form silhouetted against the starlit sky.

Lem stopped for a moment and stood still in his tracks as if searching for someone. Farrel, like lightning, sprang upon him and with his two powerful arms pinned him to the earth, relieved him of his revolver and threw it into the river.

"You would shoot at a man in the dark, you damn coward!" Farrel flamed, pounding him viciously. His voice quivered with outraged indignation. "I'd feel that I was doing this valley a favor if I quashed the life right out of you!"

"Didn't I warn you to stop interferin' with my gal?" spat Lem, foaming, and desperately struggling to free himself from Farrel's clutches.

His remarks only caused Farrel to renew his blows until Lem finally begged for mercy.

"Give a feller a chance!" Lem gasped. "I'm sorry, but I've been half crazy for a month. Let me go this time, please!"

"I ought to kill you!" Farrel thundered, his emotion greatly intensified. Finally, he relinquished his hold on the boy and allowed him to rise to a sitting position. "I'm sure I don't know what to do with a guy like you!" he added.

Lem's body was limp, his breathing difficult. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose.

"Josie was goin' to marry me, I reckon, until you stepped in and spoil't it all!" Lem said accusingly.

"Huh! What would a fine girl like Josie want to marry a guy like you for, tell me that? So you thought you'd shoot me and get me out of the way, eh? It was your intention to kill me, wasn't it?"

Lem squirmed uncomfortably. "Not exactly," he said glumly. "I heard you was goin' away so I thought I'd throw a scare into you so you wouldn't come back."

Farrel bowed his head thoughtfully for a moment. Just what to do with the boy was hard to figure out. It was quite true, a wild man shouldn't be roaming at large, but he didn't have the heart to turn him over to the authorities. He knew that he had a widowed mother who placed great faith in him.

"How would your old mother feel if she heard that you had killed a man? Do you realize that you'd have to pay the penalty? Would the fact that you had killed me be sufficient satisfaction to you to warrant spending the rest of your days behind prison bars? Stop, man, and think before you attempt anything like this again!"

Lem, apparently nettled, ran a thoughtful hand through his red hair.

"I don't know what made me do it," he muttered almost incoherently.

Farrel studied him with calculating eyes. "I know why you did it!" he said bitterly. "Because you're mean—you've got bad blood in you!"

Lem drew back angrily. "Come, give a guy a chance!" he piped belligerently. "You ain't no right to come into the valley here and meddle where you don't belong."

Farrel shrugged his shoulders hopelessly. "I haven't been meddling in your affairs, young man. I've been minding my own business."

Lem's left eye was swollen almost shut from one of Farrel's blows. After a few moments silence, he seemed to melt.

"I reckon you're right," he burst out. "I'm an idiot, I suppose, but I can't help lovin' the gal. We've grown up here together."

"If you really love Josie, why don't you straighten up and be a man? You might stand a better chance."

Lem sat with his head down without replying.

Farrel, in a moment of desperation, grabbed him by the arm and jerked him to his feet.

"I'm going to give you a chance," he said firmly. "But I want you to promise me two things; one is that you'll stop intimidating the Wilkes family, and the other is that you'll cease your hatred toward me."

His words seemed to please Lem. He wiped his swollen eye on the back of his hand.

"I'll promise, but I'm dang sorry to lose that gun."

"A man of your type has no business with a gun," Farrel retorted quickly. "Besides, it's against the law to carry concealed weapons. I could have you placed behind prison bars for your actions tonight. Run along now, and remember the next time you won't get off so easy."

Thus admonished, Lem disappeared into the darkness of the woods.

When Farrel reached the clubhouse, he told Horace and Helen about his encounter with Lem.

Helen was greatly excited. She clutched his arm with a smothered cry. "What a narrow escape! You are getting away from here in good time. You'd better change your mind about returning in the spring."

"The boy is insane," Farrel declared. "He's peeved because I lent Pap Wilkes the money to pay off his debts. He feels that it has spoiled his chances with Josie."

"You're not going to let that beast get by with this, are you?" Horace interposed. "Shooting at a man is a serious offense."

"I settled the matter then and there," Farrel said. "I don't believe he'll cause me any further trouble. I not only gave him a good beating, but I threw his gun into the river."

The following day, Farrel and Helen and Horace left for the East.

CHAPTER VIII

JOSIE went home for two weeks during the Christmas holidays. Mrs. Hall drove her out in her car. Her grandfather was happy as a child to see her again. She fairly catapaulted into his arms.

Maria shook hands with her, looked her up and down, as if amazed at the change that had taken place in her.

Josie was well groomed from head to feet. She wore a stylish blue wool dress that Mrs. Hall had made for her.

"How can you afford such a dress as that?" Maria asked, rubbing the material on the sleeve between her bony fingers.

"I've been working at the library part-time and earned enough to buy a few clothes," Josie told her. "Do you like this dress?"

"The material's pretty," Maria said, "but I don't like the way it's made."

"I'm sure glad to have you home again," Pap said, looking at her proudly. "I imagine you have learned a heap since you've been away."

Josie could see that his face was more strained, his step less brisk, than when she had last seen him. She placed her cheek against his. "Oh, yes, Grandpap, but there's plenty to learn yet."

"Yes, gal, your education has just started. You've been held back considerably, but I hope it will be possible to keep you in school till you finish."

They visited for a long while, and Josie told them all about her school work, and her life with Mrs. Hall. Pap chuckled frequently while she talked.

Josie lost no time in changing into one of her old dresses for she had come home to work. For the next two weeks at least she was going to forget about school and devote her time and energy to her folks.

Inside the diminutive little living-room, a fire burned brightly, and it was cozy and comfortable. Josie sat down at a small table to write some Christmas cards. She was looking forward to Christmas with joyful anticipation. They always heard from friends whom they never heard from at any other season.

The day before Christmas, she went to the post office and found a large package addressed to her.

"What's that you're draggin' in?" Maria asked curiously.

"It's a package that came in the mail for me," Josie replied proudly. "It's marked 'Do not open till Christmas' so I reckon I'll wait till tomorrow."

"Such foolishness! I'd open it now."

"Here's a letter for you, Aunt Maria." Josie passed over an envelope.

Maria held the envelope before the light of the window, trying to read the blurry postmark.

"I'll declare, it's from Arvilla, I wonder if she's sick ag'in." She thrust a butcher knife under the flap, ripped open the envelope, and drew forth a brightly tinselled Christmas card which showed a picture of the Baby Jesus in the manger. "Well, she never wrote a line, just signed her name. I don't know what's come over Arvilla, anyway." She rose to her feet, put her glasses away, and placed the card in the family album.

Josie's letter from Helen, written in a large sprawling hand, read:

My dear Josie:

I was pleased to learn that you were doing so well in school. I am sending you a package, but no material gift can convey my great affection for you. Please remember me to your aunt and grandfather.

All my love with the season's greetings.

Helen McIverson.

Josie read it through the third time, and then shed a few tears over it. She had missed Farrel and Helen dreadfully. Scarcely a week had passed but what she had received a letter or card from Farrel which she had always promptly acknowledged.

"It seems more like Christmas this year with presents and everything," she said to her grandfather that afternoon.

Pap smiled. "It all springs from havin' friends, I reckon," he said.

Late that afternoon, a car stopped at the gate, and Mrs. Hall, with her arms full of packages, alighted.

Josie's heart leaped when she saw her. "Oh, Mrs. Hall," she cried, running to meet her with surprise written in her face. "I didn't expect to see you again till school started."

Mrs. Hall smiled. "You didn't think that I'd be so mean as to forget you at Christmas time, did you?" she replied, kissing her affectionately.

"Grandpap! Aunt Maria!" Josie called excitedly. "Mrs. Hall is here." She led her guest into the house.

"How-do-you-do, Mr. Wilkes! Howd'y, Maria!" Mrs. Hall said, shaking hands warmly. "I hope you'll forgive me for running in on you like this, but I wanted to bring you a little remembrance for Christmas."

"That was thoughtful of you," Pap said in a glow.

Maria placed a chair for her. "You'll stay for supper, I reckon?"

"Oh, yes, do stay, Mrs. Hall!" Josie begged.

Mrs. Hall placed an arm about her. "I'd love to, dear, but I must get back to town. I'm on the committee at the church this evening, we're distributing baskets to the needy families. My, but I've missed you since you left!"

Josie flushed. "I've missed you, too, Mrs. Hall," she said, squeezing her hand. "But I'll soon be back."

They visited for a while, then after wishing them a Merry Christmas, Mrs. Hall declared that she must go. "I'll return for you New Year's day," she told Josie.

Josie watched the car until it was out of sight, wishing her new-found mother could spend Christmas with them.

"There's a real woman for you!" Pap exclaimed after she had gone.

Maria's lips puckered. "Well, she can afford to be generous; she's got plenty of money."

Pap removed his pipe from his mouth and said, "There's a great many who have plenty that are not that way, I've noticed."

Christmas morning, Josie awoke and looked out of the window. Sunnyridge lay swathed in snow. The trees in the woods were draped until each one resembled a Christmas tree. The wind was blowing out of the northwest, piling the snow about the bushes in fantastic drifts. "How beautiful!" Josie cried out, fascinated.

A few snowbirds flitted about the garden fence enjoying the white blanket. Josie dressed and hurried downstairs.

Maria was up long before her, and was seated by the kitchen window fretting about the weather."

"Merry Christmas, Aunt Maria!" Josie shouted. "Isn't this an ideal Christmas day?"

Maria shrugged. "The snow is goin' to be heavy, I'm afraid," she retorted. "It'll be hard on the stock and chickens."

After the comfort of Mrs. Hall's luxurious home, the old house at Sunnyridge seemed depressing to Josie, but she intended to do all she could to make the day a joyous one for her aunt and grandfather.

Pap Wilkes, looking bulkier than usual in his voluminous old dark overcoat, came barging in covered with snow. Josie grabbed him and planted a big kiss on his cold cheek.

"Merry Christmas, Grandpap!" she hailed gleefully.

Pap jerked off his cap, revealing a few tousled gray hairs. "The same to you, gal!" He stomped the snow off his boots which brought sharp remarks from Maria.

"There was a broom on the porch, Josiah, why in heaven's name are you bringin' all that snow in?"

Pap returned to the porch, swept his boots, and came back into the house. "It always seems just a little more like Christmas to me when the housetops are covered with snow," he remarked.

After Pap had washed his hands and face and combed his hair, they all seated themselves at the breakfast table.

"Will you return thanks, Grandpap?" Josie asked. "Mrs. Hall always does."

Maria shifted the dishes about with a bang. "No use in such showin' off," she said briskly.

Bowing his head reverently, Pap uttered a few words of Grace.

Josie chatted gayly during the meal, telling them about her experiences in high school. Maria relaxed into amiability as the meal progressed.

Breakfast over, Josie opened the back door and discovered they had company. A happy group of black-capped

chickadees flitted about the porch seeking food and shelter from the storm. Taking the broom, she swept away the snow, and threw out some bread crumbs. She was glad there were a few birds that were winter residents.

She suddenly remembered the packages. Her aunt and grandfather followed her into the living-room where she carefully unwrapped the presents, trying to still the flutter of childish delight that swept over her.

"This is for you, Grandpap," she said, reading the name on the label. "And this is for you, Aunt Maria."

"For me, child?" gasped her aunt. "Who has remembered me?"

"They've remembered us all, it seems," Josie said, gloating over the gifts. She folded the paper carefully, and wound the gold colored twine into a small ball.

Pap nervously unwrapped one of his packages which revealed a red wool scarf.

"That's from Farrel and Helen, Grandpap, isn't it beautiful?" Josie said with rapture.

"It sure is," Pap replied, and opened another package with as much enthusiasm as his granddaughter. It was a black fur cap with earlaps. "Now ain't that a dandy? Just what I've always wanted and couldn't afford to buy. I can go out now without freezin' my ears."

"I reckon it cost a heap, too," Maria said, examining the lining closely.

Helen sent Maria a pair of carpet slippers, and Mrs. Hall had left her a white shawl.

"Ain't they pretty?" Maria exclaimed. "But Land of Goodness, what use will I ever make of these slippers? When I get up in the mornin', I put on my shoes and keep 'em on till I go to bed at night."

Josie's joy was great when on opening one of the packages, she discovered that Helen had sent her a winter coat. It was black with gray fur on the collar and cuffs.

"Isn't it a honey!" she cried in admiration.

Farrel had sent her a gold compact with her initials engraved on it. She was so pleased she cried. Mrs. Hall had left her a pair of black suede pumps with bright silver buckles. She put them on and gazed at her feet admiringly. Maria gave her a box of handkerchiefs, and her grandfather surprised her with a bottle of perfume.

Josie threw her arms about his neck. "Oh, Grandpap, I'm so happy this Christmas! Not just on account of the present, but because we have some kind friends who love us, and the beautiful spirit that prompted the gifts."

Pap patted her head affectionately. "Gifts of love are the best ones, I reckon," he said. "You're a fine gal and very deservin'. You'll never be without friends; you'll have plenty of 'em."

Josie could see that her Aunt Maria had been touched by the thoughtfulness of Helen and Mrs. Hall. There was a light in her eyes that she had never seen there before, and she was glad.

It was a sunless day, bleak and cold. The cattle remained in the barn munching hay, and the chickens huddled close together in the hen house.

There were no Christmas festivities in the neighborhood that Josie knew of. She could see columns of pale smoke rising from the chimney of the clubhouse, and she couldn't help wondering how the Allens were spending Christmas.

"Plenty of snow always means a fine summer followin' it," Pap remarked. "There'll be good crops, too."

He confided to his granddaughter for the first time that he was always lonely at Christmas for it brought back dis-

turbing reminders of days gone by when his wife was living. Josie knew that he yearned for a companion; someone to lend sympathy and understanding.

That afternoon, Josie made a batch of homemade candy, placed it in a neat Christmas box, and set out across the snowy fields toward the Akery home. She wanted to do a good deed on the Saviour's birthday.

Tildah met her at the door with a smile on her face. "Well, if it ain't Josie!" she exclaimed in rapture.

Josie's face was full of friendliness as she shook hands with Tildah and Lem.

"I came to wish you all a Merry Christmas," she said joyfully.

"Come in, child, and set down," Tildah said hospitably. "I feel better already after seein' your smiling face. It seems ages since you was here. I'll declare, you've growed a foot." She slapped her hands together gleefully as she stood admiring her visitor. "Lem and I was talkin' about you this mornin'. It don't hardly seem like Christmas without you folks. Why ain't Maria been over?"

Josie took the proffered chair. "Aunt Maria seldom goes anywhere except to market, Mrs. Akery. She has been wondering why you haven't been over to our place."

Tildah's countenance changed. "Well, we didn't know how you folks felt about that money business. We thought maybe you was mad about it," she said desolately.

Josie smiled. "Oh, no, Mrs. Akery, that's forgotten long ago. It was an honest debt and ought to have been paid, besides it's Christmas, and we must forget unpleasant things and be neighborly."

Tildah's face brightened. "Well, I reckon I'm willin'."

Josie saw there was little evidence of Christmas at the Akery home. Lem was seated in a kitchen chair looking bored.

"How have you been, Lem?" Josie asked, anxious to draw him into the conversation.

Lem adjusted his necktie, took a hitch in his belt, and fidgeted a little before replying. "All right, I reckon, Josie."

Tildah, drawing her chair closer to her guest, monopolized the conversation. "How do you like school?" she asked.

"Oh, very much," Josie said eagerly. "Mrs. Hall is just like a mother to me."

Tildah's eyes were full of curiosity. "She is, is she? Plumb rich too, I reckon?"

"Well, she has plenty."

"Has your Aunt Maria ever become reconciled to your goin' away to school?"

"She doesn't say much any more one way or the other," Josie answered, bored by her neighbor's quizzing.

"She knows it wouldn't do a bit of good," Tildah laughed. "When your grandpap makes up his mind to do a thing, he always does it, I've noticed. Did you know that they're havin' a Fiddle Frolic over in Possum Holler ever' Saturday night now?"

Josie shook her head. "Have you and Lem been going?"

"Once or twice is all, but one can have a real good time over there. I wish you and Lem could go Saturday night."

While Josie's heart was wrung with pity for Lem, she had no desire to go any place with him. She visited for a while, staying longer than she had expected to.

"You and Lem had better drive over to our place this evening," she invited.

Tildah looked toward her son. Lem had been busy whittling while the conversation was going on.

"Maybe we'll drive over after supper," he said, with a sudden change of manner.

Tildah looked pleased. "Yes, I want to take Maria a mess of my sausage; it's the best I've made for years. I'm mighty

glad you came over. I was fraid you'd forget us when you went to town to school."

Josie squeezed her hand. "I never forget my friends, Mrs. Akery."

As Josie waded the snow back home, she felt better for having made the call. God had been good to her by making her happy, and she wished to convey this spirit to others.

When she reached home she told her aunt they were to have company that evening.

"Land of Goodness! What did you want to coax them over here for?"

"Because it's Christmas, Aunt Maria, and we don't want to have any hard feelings toward the neighbors."

Pap, who had been listening to the conversation, looked up with a confirming nod. "That's right, dear," he said. "We should have a forgivin' spirit."

When their visitors arrived that evening, Tildah was wearing a new black wool dress, and Lem was arrogantly displaying a new red necktie. They greeted each other effusively, and it seemed like old times in the Wilkes household.

Josie and Lem popped corn. Pap brought up some big red apples from the cellar, and they ate and talked and laughed.

It was getting late when Pap brought out his fiddle and treated them to a few old-fashioned tunes.

Tildah rose to her feet and cut didoes around the room in a vivacious manner.

"Play an old dance tune, Josiah," she urged.

Keeping time with his foot, Pap played, "*Pop Goes The Weasel*."

Tildah and Maria did a few turns about the floor, bowing to each other, and mimicking the old-time quadrille. Tildah, though a bit stiff and out of practice, still could dance.

Josie stared at her Aunt Maria, wondering if she had let go of her senses. It had been years since she had seen her act a trifle frivolous, but then, she reflected, Tildah's presence always livened things up.

They danced, all of them, to Pap's music, reels and Irish jigs, their feet tapping in time to the entrancing tunes.

Finally Pap laid his fiddle down and gazed at Tildah with mischief in his blue eyes.

"I reckon you'll have to sing '*The Lone Cowboy*,' Tildah," he said with a glow. "It's been quite a spell since I've heard it."

Tildah, in her youth, had been noted for singing mountain ballads, and her services had been much in demand at family gatherings.

Maria, returning from the cellar, said gayly: "Here, take a sip of this and you can sing better." She gave each a glass of hard cider.

Tildah emptied her glass, cleared her throat, and began to sing in a voice deep and fervent.

"My voice ain't what it used to be, Josiah," she said, when she had finished. "I guess you noticed that there's several squeaks in it now."

"Sounds mighty good yet," Pap said, staring into the fire in deep thought. The song had stirred deep memories within him. "I reckon they'll never find any pastime that can measure up to the old-fashioned housewarmin's like we used to have."

Tildah laughed. "That's right, Josiah, I've danced till four in the mornin' many times and then went to another one ag'in that night."

A sudden impulse had obviously prompted Maria to try one of the old ballads herself, and she burst forth with, "*The Lover's Dream*."

Josie stared at her aunt more surprised than ever. Her voice appeared to be strong and full, gathering power as she proceeded with the second verse. Tildah joined in on the chorus, and their voices blended well together.

The others applauded. Tildah slapped her knees and laughed.

"I'll declare, it's been years since I've heard that one," she said.

Maria's good humor appeared to please Pap. "I wish you'd sing for us oftener, Maria," he said, grinning.

Lem, after drinking more cider than his share, became hilarious, talking louder and with greater freedom than usual, while Pap was in the best of spirits.

Tildah, looking at Pap through half-closed lids, said mischievously: "I'm thinkin' that you can still do a few turns yourself, Josiah."

Pap chuckled, rose to his feet, and handed Lem the fiddle.

"Here, Lem, strike up a tune of some kind. I want to show these women how to dance."

Lem sawed back and forth for a few moments, and after many squeaks and squawls, played something that resembled "*Little Brown Jug*."

Pap, his cane in one hand, did a little jog just to show them that he had not forgotten how it was done.

Maria's eyes popped. "I'll declare, Josiah, you're actin' younger than you did ten years ago!"

Pap, obviously glad to be the center of attention, did a little back-stepping, his arms in motion all the while.

Lem, full of cider, rose to his feet. He staggered for a moment and rubbed his hand over his forehead.

"We'd better be goin', hadn't we, Ma?"

"Lands yes," Tildah said, glancing at the old clock on the wall. Then, going over to Maria, she looked straight

into her eyes. "You come over now, and don't wait so long."

"We've had a very pleasant evenin', folks," Lem said, straightening his necktie.

"We sure have," his mother agreed. "I haven't had such a good time for ages."

"Well, come ag'in!" Pap smiled.

Tildah kept talking until she was in the car. "Good-night!" she yelled, with a final wave of her hand.

After they had gone, Maria straightened the chairs around and put the room in order. Pap yawned prodigiously, wound the clock, and prepared for bed.

It was a great deal of satisfaction to Josie to observe how they all had enjoyed themselves. She hadn't seen her aunt and grandfather in such high spirits for months, and she was glad.

New Year's day, Josie returned to school.

CHAPTER XIX

THE CHARM of another Ozarkian spring enveloped the Missouri hills when Farrel returned in April. Long-stemmed violets carpeted the moist, leafy woodlands, and bluebells and azaleas formed a pink and blue fairyland. Early robins flitted about the pastures, and a bluebird caroled from an apple tree in the orchard.

Farrel was welcomed heartily by the Allens at the clubhouse, and he called at Sunnyridge to pay his respects to the Wilkes family.

Pap greeted him warmly. "Are you calculatin' on stayin' with us now?" he queried, lighting his pipe.

"I expect to, Mr. Wilkes, I've never been so happy anywhere as I have been here in Plunkett valley. I want to build me a lodge if I can find a suitable spot."

Pap stood for a moment thinking over the matter.

"Are you thinkin' of buyin' a place?" he asked with growing interest.

"Josiah Wilkes! You're not thinkin' about sellin' the roof from over your head, are you?" Maria interposed. She was seated on the veranda sewing.

Pap took a long puff at his pipe. "I reckon not, but I'd sure like to see Farrel get located somewhere close." Turning to Farrel, he added: "You wouldn't care to build on your lease by the river?"

"No, it's too low there, I'm afraid I would be flooded out," Farrel replied. "I'd like to buy five acres on high ground."

"Well, you won't have much trouble buyin' it," Pap returned, digging his cane into the ground. "There's plenty of land goin' to waste around here. Most of us ain't able to farm what we've got. The soil ain't very good either; just a bare livin' is about all a man can get out of it."

"Can you tell me of someone who has land to sell?" asked Farrell.

Pap scratched his head thoughtfully for a moment. "Why, yes, there's Jim Skaggs who owns a quarter of a section joinin' the clubhouse. I'd suggest you talk to him. He lives just two miles south of here on the rock road."

"Thanks," Farrel said. "I'll see Mr. Skaggs immediately," and after visiting for a while, he returned to the clubhouse.

Two days later, a deal was negotiated with Jim Skaggs whereby Farrel became the owner of five acres of timber land bordering on the Gasconade. He lost no time, but set to work immediately having the timber cleared off, and a spacious lodge erected from peeled pine logs. The land was nothing more than a thickly wooded hillside sloping down to the river, but it commanded a good view of the whole valley.

A contractor from Hill City was engaged to erect the building. It was to be a roomy affair, rustic in appearance, and provisions made for a study and laboratory as well as living quarters. Once his home was completed, Farrel expected to reside there permanently.

As the work progressed on his lodge, Farrel watched the building form with keen interest. From early morning until dusk, he was on hand to do what he could.

Two months later it was completed, and the lawn carefully laid out for grass and shrubbery. Farrel moved in immediately. His study was a large room with a low ceiling and walls of hewn logs chinked and plastered, all beau-

tifully whitewashed and clean. At one end of the room there was a fireplace, and at the other end a door opening into his living quarters.

His mother had shipped many things from New England to make his lodge comfortable and homelike. Shelves had been built for his specimens as well as his books. He was as pleased as a child over the lay-out.

Once he was settled there, he strove to find an appropriate name for it. He spent several days whittling over the matter, finally deciding upon "*Ravenwood*." He built a bird bath in the back yard, and expected to provide a winter feeding ground for his feathered friends.

Farrel was working about the grounds one June morning when Pap Wilkes came hobbling up all out of breath. He was wearing a clean white shirt and a new straw hat.

"I'm just no good at climbin' hills any more," Pap said wearily. "I'm clean tuckered out." He threw himself down on the steps and leaned on his cane.

"I'm sure glad you came up, Mr. Wilkes," Farrel said hospitably. "I haven't had a visit with you for some time. How is Maria?"

Pap chuckled. "I'm afraid she hasn't improved much. She's just as high strung as ever." He took his tobacco pouch from his pocket and filled his pipe.

Farrel smiled. "What do you think of my place here?"

Pap rose to his feet and stood gazing at the building with deep interest reflected in his face.

"Swell!" he said. "You sure picked the right spot for it. You can see all over the valley from here."

Farrel showed him through the building, and Pap praised the workmanship highly.

"Couldn't have been done better' if I'd have done it myself," he appraised. "You're sure nicely located here."

"They sat down on the veranda and visited for a while.

"You see, Mr. Wilkes, I want to live out here close to nature, where I can watch things grow. I never cared for large cities. I think I'll be quite contented here," Farrel said earnestly.

"I'm sure you will," Pap said interestedly. "I reckon you paid a plenty for these five acres."

"Fifty dollars an acre," Farrel replied. "I thought it was quite reasonable."

"That was plenty considerin' how land is sellin' right now. The timber on it is about all that has any value. Of course, it makes an ideal spot for your purpose."

"No doubt you have been rather lonesome these past few months without your granddaughter," Farrel said solicitously.

"You can't imagine how much I've missed her, but I'm mighty glad she went. She has learned a heap. I'm lookin' for her home any day now."

"It will be nice to see Josie again," Farrel said. "I imagine she has changed quite a bit. I've been thinking about driving over to see her."

After exploring the grounds, Pap announced that he must be going.

"I've been wantin' to get up here ever since you started to build, but just couldn't get around to it. I told Maria this mornin' that I was goin' to make this call. I'm glad we're goin' to have you for a permanent resident."

Farrel thanked him, and invited him to come again.

The following morning, while tramping in the woods, Farrel came upon Lem Akery by the river. It was the first time he had seen the boy since his return. He was standing alongside a small boat as if contemplating a trip down the stream. He was wearing a faded suit of blue denim, rubber boots, and a slouchy gray cap.

"Hello, Mr. McIverson," Lem said, his face full of friendliness.

Farrel was amazed at the change in Lem's manner, and preferring to have him for a friend rather than an enemy, he stopped to talk.

"How have you been getting along, Lem?" he asked.

"Oh, all right, I reckon," Lem replied.

The spring rains had been heavy and the river was up, flooding the lowlands. Some of the residents in the valley had been compelled to move to higher ground.

"Would you like to take a little trip down the river?" Lem asked. "There's plenty of room if you want to go along."

Farrel, after a moment's hesitation, decided to accompany him. If the boy wanted to be friends, he'd show him that he was willing to meet him half way, Farrel thought.

In his anxiety to get started, Lem sprang into the boat, only to stumble awkwardly and came near falling into the river.

They had gone a mile perhaps when the river widened to a marvelous extent, and the water became exceedingly rough. Lem was having difficulty keeping the boat righted. Each minute, the Gasconade appeared to be rising, as it flowed on in rebellious haste, threatening to flood acres of fertile fields.

Farrel became uneasy. "I fear that it is dangerous to go farther," he said. "Let's turn back."

Lem's manner suddenly changed. His friendliness disappeared like the sun under a cloud. His eyes turned green, and there was a mean, determined look in his face.

The current was becoming swifter each moment, and Lem was straining every fiber to manipulate the oars. Farrel scanned his face suspiciously. Could it be possible that the boy had invited him on this trip purposely, hoping to drown

him? He cursed himself for being so foolish as to believe that Lem had gotten over his malice.

"Let me have the oars!" he shouted.

"The hell with you!" Lem barked, disregarding the command.

Farrel sensed that Lem was set on drowning him, even though he lost his own life in the attempt. He hastily considered his plan of action. He planted a fist in Lem's right jaw which frightened him so that he leaped into the water and started swimming toward shore. He could see that the lad was a good swimmer and was going to make it. . . . He couldn't make up his mind whether to follow him or stay with the boat. He feared that he wouldn't be able to battle the swift current.

Farrel grabbed the oars with a wild look in his face. By this time, the water was so swift it was impossible to swing the boat around. The current was carrying him downstream. His brain was hazy. He tried with every ounce of strength that he possessed to head the craft toward shore, but a floating log that came rushing by almost upset the boat. At a turn of the river, he heard a riot of waters and saw that he was being hurled into the rapids.

"Help! Help!" he called, but it was useless, there was no one to hear his appeal. He knew he'd never be able to swim ashore in such waters. The boat, by this time, was going round and round, bouncing like a rubber ball. Realizing that it was futile to attempt to row further, he leaped over the side into the water, keeping a firm hold on the side of the craft. The water chilled and numbed his senses. Strange emotions surged through him as he battled with the elements. Finally, he lost his grip, and started swimming vigorously with all the strength he had left. A rising sheet of water fell upon him, blinding him. His muscles refused to function, he lost consciousness.

When he came to, he was lying on the sand, and a tall man was bent over him, working his limbs back and forth, trying to start circulation. His head was heavy. He tried to speak but his lips wouldn't move. He was as helpless as a child. He stared at the man pitifully.

"Well, you had a narrow escape, young man," the stranger said with feeling. "It wasn't an easy job pullin' you out of there. I thought for a while you was goin' to drown us both."

Farrel tried to rise but his muscles seemed to be paralyzed.

"This is terrible!" he muttered faintly.

"You don't know the lay of the land down this way, do you?" the stranger asked.

"I'm afraid not," Farrel said weakly. "I'm very thankful to you for saving my life. What is your name?"

"Williams — Ben Williams, I live just over the hill there. I came down to see how much the river had risen since yesterday. I'm afraid the crops are ruined."

Williams took a plug of tobacco from his pocket and bit off a chew. "It must be all of five miles."

"Gosh!" Farrel muttered, belching.

Williams helped him to his feet. He tottered for a moment, but after walking about a bit, supported by his new-found friend, he seemed to gain strength.

"I feel sick, my stomach is all shot," Farrel said desolately. "I must have about a barrel of that river water in my gills. Where can I secure transportation back to the clubhouse?"

Williams looked at him sympathetically. "I'll take care of you. You're in no shape to travel very far. Let me help you on my horse."

Farrel, once astride the horse, felt dizzy, and his body swayed back and forth for a moment. His wet clothing clung to him.

"Do you think you can hang on there?" Williams asked.

Farrel nodded.

Leading the horse, Williams followed a path that led directly up a hill. Reaching the crest, they came into a clearing where the Williams residence stood. It was a small unpainted frame dwelling, and near the door stood a tall elm tree with widespreading branches. A large hound lay on the doorstep, his head in his paws, his eyes fixed reproachfully on the visitor. Williams helped Farrel off the horse, then rapped lightly on the door.

A pleasant-faced, blue-eyed woman with dark wavy hair, answered the knock, and stood staring at them in astonishment.

"Ben Williams!" she gasped. "Have you been in the water?"

"Sort of look like it, don't I, Linda? I just fished this feller out of the river. He came mighty near losin' his life and is just about played out." Then, turning to Farrel, he added: "You'd better rest a while before you go any farther." He led the way into the house. "You can get your wet clothes off and lie on the lounge there until they dry. Linda will make you some coffee to take the chill off."

"I'm sorry to be such a bother but I seem to be chilling."

"Land sakes!" exclaimed Linda. "You're shivering. Just make yourself at home." She hurried to the kitchen and placed the coffee pot on the stove.

Williams gave Farrel some dry clothing, and placed his wet garments by the kitchen stove to dry.

The coffee proved to be stimulating to Farrel's overwrought nerves, and he felt more like himself.

"You won't be tryin' the rapids ag'in when the river is up, will you?" jibed his host.

Farrel told Williams about accepting the ride in Lem's boat.

"Last fall, just before I left for the East, he took a shot at me in the woods one night, but the bullet missed its mark. He had it in for me because I befriended the Wilkes family. When I met him this morning, he appeared to be friendly, and I thought he had gotten over his malice, but it was only a ruse to try and drown me."

"I've seen Lem a time or two; I never did think he was all there," Williams said gravely.

Linda Williams hastily prepared a meal which consisted of large slices of country ham, heaped high on a plate, and rhubarb pie.

Farrel didn't feel much like eating, but he ate some, and felt his strength returning rapidly. He thanked the woman repeatedly for her trouble and hospitality.

Late in the afternoon, Williams saddled two horses, and accompanied Farrel to his lodge. On the way, Farrel told him of his work, and why he was in that section of the country.

"Well, come down in our neighborhood occasionally and drop around for dinner," Williams invited.

Farrel thanked him and insisted upon paying him generously for his trouble.

"I'll be seeing you again, Mr. Williams," Farrel said in parting.

Farrel felt extremely bitter toward Lem for attempting to drown him. He resolved that he would even things up with him the first opportunity.

CHAPTER XX

THE SCHOOL term drew to a close, and Josie finished her first year on the Honor Roll. The final examinations had not been too difficult for by concentrated effort she had mastered her subjects pretty thoroughly. All except Latin; it was extremely hard for her. During the few months in school she had become attached to the whole faculty. Mr. Winterset, the superintendent, complimented her on her work, and expressed the hope that she would return again in the fall.

When Josie saw the large class of Seniors, all dressed in dark flowing robes, received their diplomas for their four years work, she exulted. She knew they were leaving H.C.H.S. to go forth into the world; some to college, others to earn their own living, and she wondered if they weren't a trifle sad. During the long period they must have become greatly attached to the old school she reflected.

In the few short months she had been there, she had come to know the building as well as she did the Plunkett Valley schoolhouse.

Her heart went out in gratitude to all those who had been so kind and helpful, and she was downright sorry to leave. Mrs. Hall had been a mother to her, and she had become attached to all of her classmates. Amanda Dodds gave a party for her during Commencement Week and invited the girls in her room. They all seemed to want her for a friend now, and she often laughed over her early timidity. It soothed her proud little heart to receive from them the consideration she hoped she merited.

She had been dating some during the last semester. She had gone with Fred Walling, president of her English class, to several school functions and enjoyed his company.

Looking back over the past few months, it all seemed like a dream. A surge of heartache swept over her when she realized it was all over until fall and she must go back to Sunnyridge; back to her old life again. But then she would be busy, and the time would soon pass. She was eager to finish her education. She realized, though, that she must not think just of herself; she was needed at home.

"I know I'm going to miss you greatly, Mrs. Hall," she said. It was Friday and the end of Commencement. She was preparing to leave for home.

Mrs. Hall motioned her to a seat on the davenport beside her.

"Josie, I want to have a heart-to-heart talk with you," she said, her tone a trifle sad. "You've made wonderful progress this year. In fact, in all my school work, I've never seen anything to equal it. I want you to promise me that you'll let nothing prevent you from returning in the fall."

Josie, touched by her kind words and interest, broke down and cried. Later, gaining her composure, she wiped her eyes and said in a voice of appreciation: "I want you to know, Mrs. Hall, that no matter whether I return or not, I appreciate all you've done for me. You've been just like a mother. I'll never be able to repay you for your kindness."

"I've enjoyed it, dear; it provided new interests for me. It was just what I needed. I could have done more for you in a financial way, but I thought it best to allow you to earn your own way if possible. It is good training for young people, and a character builder. A great many boys and girls who have everything given them, so often do not know how to appreciate such gifts. Success comes only to those

who are willing to work. What I admire about you most, Josie, is your strength of character. You can thank your Aunt Maria for that. While she appeared, at times, to be harsh and unfeeling, she taught you to be modest, pure, respectable, things which in the long run mean more than anything else to a girl."

Josie had never thought of it in that way before. She bowed her head thoughtfully.

"I don't know what I'll do with myself this summer," Mrs. Hall continued. "I know your folks need you at home, or I should be tempted to coax you to spend the vacation period with me. I've thought some of going to California for a few weeks. You know, when one is alone in the world it is a problem to know what to do at times."

"I'm sure that wherever you go, Mrs. Hall, you'll be happy for you make others happy," Josie said with feeling.

Josie climbed the stairs and began packing the old trunk. She had so many clothes now, it seemed. She had made several dresses for herself with but little cost to her. She wondered what her Aunt Maria would say about her wardrobe.

The following morning, Mrs. Hall drove her out to Sunnyridge.

When Josie reached home, she found her Aunt Maria head-over-heels in work.

"It's a blessin' that you got home when you did," Maria lamented. "With Josiah down part of the time, I've got my hands full."

Pap greeted his granddaughter with a big hug, and held her at arms length in admiration.

"I can't believe that you're the same girl," he chuckled.

Josie could see that he was failing fast, and her heart went out to him in tender sympathy. "Nothing could change

my feelings toward you, Grandpap," she said joyfully. Then, turning to her aunt, she added: "It won't be so hard now, Aunt Maria, I'll help wherever I can and you can take a little time to rest."

"Rest nothin'! I just want to get the work done," Maria retorted briskly.

Josie observed that her aunt's disposition had not improved any during her absence, she still wore a frown. She realized that it was going to be hard for her to take up her old life again, and do the kind of work she formerly had done, but she was determined to do it. She was going to show her grandfather that going to school had not made any change in her in that respect. She put on one of her old dresses and started getting dinner. Her grandfather sat down in the kitchen and talked to her while she worked.

During the next few days, Josie wandered around the beloved old farm, recapturing a faint echo of the joy she had felt before she went away. There never would be a happiness like that again; but because of her intense love for Sunnyridge, every homecoming, under whatever conditions, would have its joy. It was wonderful for her to pick her way through the timber, to pause for a moment and listen to the chirping of a tanager, to lift her head and sniff the cool invigorating air, the fresh aroma of the woods in spring, which was like a tonic.

She was eager to see Farrel. She had not seen him since his return from the East. On one of her walks through the woods, she saw him coming across the swinging bridge with his camera and notebook in hand. Her heart rose as he waved her a welcome.

"Well, hello, Josie, I'm surely glad to see you!" he said, extending his hand. "My, what a change!"

While Josie was pleased to see him, she held herself aloof, self-contained, a bit challenging, her small head held

a trifle arrogantly. She felt much older now, much more understanding about life, and she acted as an adult, sophisticated and knowing.

"Have you changed? Why, yes, you've grown tall and straight and graceful. You're a very attractive young lady."

She was a bit frightened by the feeling that rushed over her and she felt her cheeks grow warm. She drew back at the hunger in his eyes and called forth all of her resources to silence the pounding of her heart. She realized that he was a dangerous person for her to see much of; he was so likely to bring her to her knees in adoration.

They seated themselves on an old tree trunk and visited. Josie told him about what a time she had had with her Latin, and gave him a full account of her year's work. A wren in a nearby sapling was fairly splitting its throat with song, and the sparkling sunshine, the odor of spring blossoms, filled them with an obscure happiness.

"I'm glad you love flowers, Josie," Farrel said, examining one of the blossoms she had plucked from a nearby bush. "Isn't that exquisite? Just what is it, anyway, that attracts one to a beautiful flower?"

She raised her two blue eyes to his in wonder. "Their beauty, their perfume, don't you think?"

"Have you ever noticed how a baby will grasp a flower with such delight?"

Josie nodded. "Mrs. Hall says that children and flowers are akin to each other; all a part of God's kingdom."

"I believe she's right," Farrel said, his gaze riveted upon an ostentatious brown-thrasher, which in a tree overhead, was spurting forth its pleasing, "*Put-er-up, put-er-up, put-er-up.*"

"Look! Look!" gasped Josie, leaping to her feet. A bright yellow bird with a black crown lit in a tree nearby and began a cheerful song.

Farrel raised his glass. "That's an American Goldfinch sure as the world!"

"Tell me about Helen?" urged Josie when the excitement had subsided.

"She's at the Art Institute in Chicago, hale and hearty as ever. She insists she's coming down here again this summer."

"Oh, good, she's just like a sister to me!" Josie said with feeling.

Farrel insisted upon Josie accompanying him to his lodge. She was eager to see his new home which she had heard so much about. Her eyes bulged when she saw the building. When he showed her through the spacious rooms, she was quite voluble in expressing her admiration. It was quite different from the way she had it pictured.

"It's simply wonderful, Farrel!" Josie cried in a glow.

Farrel was all enthusiasm as he led the way from one room to the other.

"How will you like having me here the entire year?" he asked.

"That will be nice," she said, a smile lighting her face.

They moved on out to the veranda and stood staring out over the valley.

"What a magnificent view of the river from here!" she said.

"I'm glad you like my lodge," he said wistfully. "I am quite proud of it."

"You have reason to be, Farrel, it's lovely. You have transformed this rough hillside into a spot of beauty. Thanks, awfully, for showing me through."

Farrel walked home with her. Without either of them realizing it, they were holding hands as they tripped across the bridge.

It was getting late when they reached Sunnyridge, and the sun hesitated a few moments before taking a dip behind the hills.

"Land of Goodness!" Maria panted, peering sternly at Farrel over her spectacles. Her hair was disheveled, and her dark dress was slit in shreds. "I didn't know there was anyone around."

Farrel, with an apologetic smile, said pleasantly: "Don't mind me, Miss Wilkes."

Pap soon appeared on the scene to greet him, his shirt collar unbuttoned at the neck.

"What do you think of my gal since she has been away to school?" he asked.

"She has developed into a very beautiful and accomplished young lady," Farrel returned, smiling.

His remark pleased Pap and he grinned from ear to ear.

"She done a heap better than I ever expected she would considerin' her early trainin'," he said, gazing at his granddaughter with a look of admiration. "I hope she can continue in school till she graduates."

Josie flushed while the conversation was going on.

"About all she had to do up there was dress herself up and study books," Maria interposed. "That may develop their minds, but it don't make 'em energetic."

Pap looked at his sister defiantly. "There's different kinds of work, Maria. Some folks work with their minds, while others use their muscles."

Maria, with a quick come-back, said: "And there's some that don't work either way, Josiah."

"I suppose there are a few no 'count fellers that wouldn't work if they had the chance, but they're havin' a pretty hard time of it nowadays," Pap said.

"Josephine!" Maria said briskly. "Have you forgotten about your chores?"

Josie excused herself and entered the kitchen.

Maria muttered something unintelligible about folks not having anything to do but visit and cast a furtive glance in the direction of the two men.

"Won't you stay for supper?" Pap invited, when Farrel mentioned leaving.

"Thanks, Mr. Wilkes, but I must be getting back. I've taken up too much of your time already."

"My time ain't very valuable any more," Pap said, following him to the gate. "I'm glad you dropped around, come back ag'in."

Farrel thanked him, and made his way back to his lodge. He marveled over the change a single year had wrought in Josie. She had developed into an amazingly pretty girl.

CHAPTER XXI

IT WAS in the latter part of July when Pap Wilkes took down with a fever. He ran high temperatures each day which were hard to reduce, and was in such a weakened condition that he could scarcely speak above a whisper. His face was gray and thin and his eyes sunken deep in their sockets. His wasted form, almost lifeless, lay on the old high-posted bed in the room adjoining the kitchen.

When he felt able, Josie sat by the bed and read the paper to him. Not for one instant did she permit herself to think he might not recover. God wouldn't take him away from me, she told herself. She did not see how she could go on living without him. From the earliest days of her childhood, he had been friend and protector. She could always go to him with her problems, serious or trivial. He understood her moods better than she did herself.

She entered the sick-room one morning and stood by his bedside for a moment. He looked worse than she could ever remember him looking, so very thin and sallow and incredibly old.

He recognized her immediately and seemed to want to speak but was too weak.

"What is it, Grandpap?" she asked, bending over and straining every nerve in the tremendous urge to catch one faint word from him. "Do you want something?"

Finding him so weak frightened her. His thin, pallid hand lay lifeless at the edge of the bed. She pressed it with a fierce energy beseeching him to speak to her.

"Do you want a drink, Grandpap?" she asked. She bent down pressing her face close to his withered one.

Pap opened his mouth to speak, and Josie listened closely.

"Farrel is a good man, Josie," he murmured faintly.

Josie kissed his forehead. "Indeed he is, Grandpap, I'm so glad to hear you say that."

She placed a hand on his forehead and saw that it was burning. She wet a cloth in cold water and laid it on his brow, and he seemed to go to sleep.

Josie was greatly upset over her grandfather's illness. Worry had robbed her of her sleep and sapped her efficiency. She returned to the kitchen where her aunt was getting breakfast.

"Oh, Aunt Maria, I'm so worried about grandpap!" she said. "He's getting weaker every day. I just can't give him up!" Tears scalded her eyes.

Maria looked at her worriedly. "There's no use grievin' yourself sick over it, besides there's work to be done."

Farrel called every day to inquire after Pap, and occasionally ordered something sent out from town for him. Josie saw that her Aunt Maria did not encourage his visits, but kept up the affectation of being too preoccupied with her work to pay much attention to him. But nothing else mattered now that her grandfather's life hung in the balance. She sensed that her aunt had almost worn herself out caring for him.

On a morning in the last week of July, when Maria went in to give Pap his medicine, he had slipped away quietly as he had lived.

Josie was heartbroken and refused to be comforted. The thought that she must go through the remainder of her life without either father, mother, or grandparents, was painful. She couldn't help thinking of all that her grandfather had done for her; the tenderness and consideration

he had shown her. Now his eyes were closed in a sleep from which he would never waken. She suffered agony too deep to describe. And when she saw her Aunt Maria, with bosom heaving, shedding bitter tears over the loss of her only brother, she was moved to deep and tender compassion. She knew that despite her cold exterior, she had a good heart throbbing in her bosom.

Parson Willoughby remained close by to comfort the grief-stricken relatives.

"We don't know why this had to happen, Josie," he said sadly. "But we must feel that it was God's will."

Mrs. Hall, Helen McIverson, and Josie's Aunt Arvilla, came for the funeral.

"I'm so glad you came, Mrs. Hall!" Josie said heart-brokenly. "Next to grandpap, you understand me the best."

"I'm sorry that I didn't come before, dear," Mrs. Hall said.

Parson Willoughby conducted the funeral service. His voice broke frequently as he praised the high character of Josiah Wilkes. He spoke of him as a true Christian, humble, and one who was ready to meet his God. Tears poured from the aged pastor's eyes when he mentioned the close friendship which existed between himself and the deceased. "Not once," he said emphatically, "did I ever hear him speak disparagingly of one of his fellow men."

Josie felt that it wasn't fair that her grandfather should have to be buried on such a dark day, as she gazed through tears at the casket resting on bars across the opening in the clay. It should have been a day of clear sky and bright sunshine. She knew how much he despised rainy days which confined him to the house. But it didn't matter now to the shrunken figure in the black casket. His suffering was over. It was hard to say good-by forever. She didn't

see how she could ever be happy again. She kept fighting back her tears trying to be brave.

"Oh, Helen, you can't possibly know how much he meant to me!" she said, sobbing on her friend's shoulder. "What your father and mother are to you, that's what grandpap was to me!"

"I understand, dear," Helen said, wiping tears from her own eyes.

Mrs. Hall remained at Sunnyridge over night.

"You'll soon be coming back to school, dear," she said the following day. She was seated on the lounge in the tiny living-room at Sunnyridge with Josie's head pillowed in her lap. "I realize you have lost your best friend, but I want you to know that there are others who love you. You are like a daughter to me, and you're always welcome at my home."

Josie, at the moment, was thinking of her grandfather, and how much she missed him. His death had been a heart-wringing experience for her.

She raised her blue eyes and said sadly: "You're awfully kind, Mrs. Hall."

Mrs. Hall patted her on the head affectionately.

"I hope you'll continue your school work, it's so important, and you were doing well. If your grandfather were alive, he'd want you to, I'm sure."

Josie's eyes showed deep thought. "Yes, grandpap would want me to return to school," she said sadly. "I'll have a talk with Aunt Maria and we'll decide what is best for us to do. She can't live here alone. She's getting old, and grandpap's death was hard for her to bear. She's a good woman even though she is difficult to understand." She grasped Mrs. Hall's hand and held it tight. "It has helped so much to have you with me at this time."

Mrs. Hall's lips brushed Josie's hot cheek.

"I'm glad I could be here, dear, to comfort you in your great sorrow. Promise me that you won't grieve any more, that you'll leave it all with God."

Tears gushed forth again from Josie's eyes. "I'll try, Mrs. Hall," she said faintly.

"I will have to return home this afternoon, and I wish that you were going along. You must feel welcome to come to me at any time."

Josie was too full for words, she did not reply.

Mrs. Hall left late that afternoon, and Arvilla the day following. Josie spent the rest of the week moving restlessly about the place. She missed her grandfather terribly and felt so much alone.

"Josephine!" Maria said to her one day, and her voice seemed to have regained its old-time strength. "It's about time we talked things over and reached some understandin' about the future. Do you plan on goin' back to school?"

"Oh, I don't know, Aunt Maria," Josie replied with a troubled look in her eyes. "I can't make up my mind to leave the old place here and return to school. Besides, what would you do? You couldn't live here alone. Grandpap loved Sunnyridge so much, and now that he's gone, I want to be near him always. Can't we keep on living here?"

Maria, looking enormously worried, rocked back and forth.

"I don't know, it'll be pretty hard sleddin'," she said seriously. "The place here will be left to you. We'll have to sell off enough to pay Josiah's funeral expenses, I reckon."

Josie moved closer to her aunt and said: "I can't bear the thought of leaving for good. Sunnyridge is the only home that I've ever known, and I love every sun-scorched acre of its fields, from the river on the north to the ridge

on the south. Besides, I feel I owe it to you to remain here with you."

"Huh! You don't need to worry about me; I'll get along. There's nothin' here to fuss about that I can see."

Josie feared that her aunt was withholding her real feelings in the matter. "Grandpap wouldn't want us to leave Sunnyridge, I'm sure. Let's think it over for a few days before we decided. We don't want to be too hasty."

Late that evening when the sun was going down behind the hills, Josie stole over to the cemetery. Kneeling beside the fresh mound, with her hands upraised, she cried out: "Oh, Grandpap, I'm so much alone! I need your comforting love!" She finally threw herself down on the grave and wept bitter tears.

It was there that Farrel and Helen found her when dusk approached. They had remained close by to help in whatever way they could.

Farrel went to Josie immediately and helped her to her feet.

"You mustn't grieve like this, Josie!" he said tenderly. "You'll break your heart and it won't do any good. I want to have a talk with you."

"Oh, Farrel, I came to commune with grandpap, I feel so near him here," she said with deep feeling.

Farrel laid a gentle hand on her shoulder. "But your grandfather is not here; only his poor withered form lies here. The time has come, Josie, when you must look to others for guidance. The only thing you can do now is to hope and pray that some day you will be reunited. You must try to do the things of which your grandfather would approve were he here to guide you. Let me be your adviser in this great crisis." His tone had dropped to earnest entreaty. "I think you should go back to school this fall."

Josie raised her eyes, there was a heartbroken look in her face. She wished these good friends knew her heart.

"Let we who love you, help you," Helen interposed, placing an arm tenderly about her. "I know it's hard, dear. Wouldn't you like to return to Mrs. Hall? She wants you so much. You wouldn't be far away, you could come back often for visits."

Josie was too upset to talk. She sobbed quietly in her handkerchief.

"I hope you'll see fit to continue your school work. You've made such a wonderful start," Farrel said earnestly.

"I'd love to, Farrel, but there are other things just as important. Aunt Maria is getting old, and I can't desert her after all that she has done for me."

"I'd be willing to pay a good substantial rent for Sunnyridge; I'd turn it into an experimental farm. The income from it would enable you and your aunt to live comfortably in town. That way, you could finish your education."

Josie's eyes opened wide in surprise and admiration. "That's very kind of you, Farrel, but I'm afraid Aunt Maria wouldn't be happy living in town. I haven't decided yet definitely what I will do."

Farrel took Josie home in his car. "Remember now, don't grieve too much," he said earnestly. "Good-night!"

When Josie went in the house, Lem was there in conference with her aunt. He had been good to them during those trying days, and he appeared to grieve as much over her grandfather's death as if he had been blood relation.

Lem turned to her with his face full of eagerness. "I was just tellin' your Aunt Maria that I'd like to rent the farm here. You can give me a share of the grain, and keep on livin' here just like you always have."

"Thanks, Lem, you're awfully kind," Josie said softly. "We haven't decided yet just what we'll do. How is your mother?"

"She's not so well," Lem replied. "She's been ailin' ever since the funeral. I reckon she thought a heap of Pap."

"I'm sorry, Lem, I'll try and get over to see her."

"You'd better let me take charge of the farm here before it begins to go down," Lem said persuasively.

"We'll be needin' some help all right, Lem," Maria interposed. "We'll let you know."

The following day, simply from a longing to have something to do, Josie wandered into the woods. Despite the pain in her heart, she couldn't help feeling how good the earth smelled; how pleasant it was to hear the birds trilling again.

Once more she was forced to make an important decision. "Shall I return to school or remain here with Aunt Maria?" was the question which kept running through her mind. She wished she actually knew her aunt's heart. . . . She sensed that her aunt was failing and couldn't remember like she used to. It would be a shame to leave her here alone, she thought.

Finally she reached a decision. "Sunnyridge is mine, and Aunt Maria is all I have left; I will stay here with them," she resolved.

While she tood there by a large elm, busy with her thoughts, she saw Helen coming across the swinging bridge dressed in a becoming blue slack suit.

"Oh, Helen, I'm so glad to see you!" Josie said, running to meet her. "I need someone to talk to."

"Well, I haven't anything to do but visit," Helen answered. "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Oh, just listening to the birds. They have helped to revive my spirits."

"I'm so glad," Helen said. "There are a great many things in God's universe which we can't understand, yet there are so many things to love and appreciate that it seems

a shame not to make the best of life. Your face is brighter than I have seen it for days."

Josie grasped Helen's hand. "With such kind friends, I should be happy, I suppose. My, how I shall miss you when you go home!"

"You'll be returning to school by that time, and you'll be so busy with your studies you won't have time to think of me."

Josie hesitated for a moment, then said: "I've given up the idea of returning to school. I shall remain here with Aunt Maria. I believe that is best. I appreciate, so much, what you and Farrel have done for me, but my aunt needs me. I simply couldn't leave her."

Helen bit her lip. "I'm disappointed, of course, but I presume there is nothing finer than loyalty to one's people."

"She took care of grandpap in his old age, and has practically raised me since I was ten years old. I feel that I owe her a debt of gratitude. She never could be happy living in town."

"And does she want you to remain with her?" Helen asked.

"She doesn't say much, she's funny that way, it's difficult to get her to express herself."

"Listen, there's something I must tell you," Helen said seriously. "Horace and I are going to get married this fall."

Josie squeezed her hand tight. "Oh, I'm so glad to hear that, Helen! I'm sure you will be happy."

The girls visited until late in the afternoon when Josie suddenly realized that it was chore time. "I must get home," she said, "Come over real soon."

CHAPTER XXII

WHEN Josie reached home, she found her Aunt Maria out in the barnyard milking. She appeared to be in a terrible mood, flinging monosyllables at the calf which insisted upon having its share of the milk. It was the first time since her grandfather's death Josie had seen her mad. Beads of perspiration stood out on her forehead. She had tried exceptionally hard the past few days to avoid doing anything that would vex her for she knew her heart was aching as well as her own. "I should have been home before chore time," she muttered in self-reproach.

"I'm sorry I was gone so long, Aunt Maria," she said in a tone of deep apology. "I met Helen in the woods, and the hours flew by like minutes."

Maria broke into swift conversation. "This pesky calf is hard to manage. We need a man around here to help out."

Clouds were gathering in the west, and the roar of thunder could be heard in the distance.

"We'll have rain before dark," Maria predicted, gazing at the sky.

Josie helped with the supper. They did not go to much trouble just for the two of them. They fried a few slices of ham and made some gravy. There were potatoes left from dinner. After they had eaten, Josie insisted upon washing the dishes herself. It began to rain and blow, and the oil lamp on the kitchen table flickered. Maria quickly closed the windows and pulled down the blinds.

Seeing a woebegone look in her aunt's face, Josie said: "You look tired, Aunt Maria, lie down for a while and rest yourself."

"I don't want to get in the habit of lyin' down before bedtime," Maria replied, and grabbing her knitting, she seated herself in Pap's old rocking chair. "What's come over you, gal, you seem to be in better spirits this evenin'."

"I am, Aunt Maria," Josie said softly, and going over, she placed an arm on her aunt's shoulder. "I've decided definitely to give up my school work and remain here with you."

Maria's face kindled. "Then you do love me a little, child!" she burst out, her voice trembling with emotion. "I'm glad for you're all I have left and I couldn't bear to be separated from you." She gave Josie a warm hug and wiped her eyes with her apron.

It was the first time her aunt had ever shown any affection toward her, and Josie was pleased. She threw herself down on the floor and leaned against her aunt's knee. The rain was beating on the roof, and occasional claps of thunder shook the house.

Josie squeezed her aunt's withered hand. "We're not going to be separated, Aunt Maria. We're going to live right here at Sunnyridge, just like we always have."

The water, by this time, had begun to seep in at the loose windows and under the door.

"Put a rag rug under the door there, gal," Maria said hurriedly. "This rain will make late pastures good."

Josie dutifully complied, and returned to her former position.

"Josie," Maria said, after what seemed an interminable silence. "There are some things I want to tell you and I reckon now is a good time to begin." Her face was grave.

Josie's eyes were puzzled. "What, Aunt Maria?"

Maria drew a long breath and began. "There have been times when you must have thought I was very cross with you, but my life hasn't been a very happy one." She appeared to be in a state of great mental perturbation. She paused a moment and continued: "There was a day when I was young too, rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed, just like you, and I wasn't bad lookin' either, even if I do say it myself. In those days, I used to make daily trips to the clubhouse with whatever produce we had to sell. Mr. Wilson run the place then, and he always bought all of our surplus. I was young and innocent and knew very little about people and their ways."

Josie's eyes began to dance. She couldn't imagine what her aunt was going to reveal. She gazed at her in wide-eyed wonder and amazement.

A frown gathered on Maria's brow, and she continued: "There was a young man stoppin' at the clubhouse at that time by the name of Frank Gibbon — or else that's the name he went under. He was good lookin' and had polished manners. He courted me for a while and I was foolish enough to believe he was in love with me. He took me around in a hired rig, bought me presents, and passed compliments on me. Oh, Josie, I really did love him!"

Josie's eyes widened. A love affair in connection with her aunt was something she had never dreamed of. She was so surprised she was speechless. Her mind suddenly became confused. She recalled her aunt's bitter hatred of strangers, and in her great sympathy for her, she forgot everything else. That she had had a bitter disappointment, one which had left her cold and heartbroken, was quite evident.

"Why haven't you told me this before, Aunt Maria?" she asked.

Maria wet her lips with her tongue and said: "I didn't think it was necessary; I've never spoken of it to anyone. But to go on with the story, I thought at the time that Frank and I was goin' to be so happy. He praised this part of the country highly, and said he was comin' back here to live permanently. I trusted him implicitly. He had such a strong hold on me, I felt that I would rather part with anyone than him. Well, when summer ended, he claimed he had to go back to New York to settle up his affairs. He made all sorts of promises and told me he would be back within a month." As she talked, malice crept into her voice. Her blue eyes sparkled and color came into her face. "It was all bosh, he was as fickle as old Satan himself. I've never heard from him to this day. For weeks, I hoped and prayed that he would return."

Josie had risen to her knees now and stood with both hands clasped tightly together. She understood with a deep and tender compassion. The wall that had separated her from her aunt for so long had suddenly collapsed, making way for a better understanding between them. She felt closer to her in that moment than she had ever felt before. The fact that she was humbling herself, telling her secrets which had been locked in her bosom for years, caused her heart to go out to her in a flood of sympathy.

"Do you suppose he could have written and you didn't receive the letters?" she asked eagerly.

"No, he was just a trifler, that's all. I was just a play-thing for him to amuse himself with while he was here." Her tone expressed the contempt which she now felt for him. "I'm tellin' you this for your own good. Don't let this same thing happen to you; don't let any man make a fool out of you. A swarm of them fellers come to the clubhouse ever' year to fish and loiter around. They like to get acquainted with the natives; it's sort of a lark for

'em. They don't seem to think we're human bein's just the same as they are."

Maria run her hand through Josie's hair thoughtfully. Outside, the thunder boomed on, and the rain continued to fall in torrents.

Josie wiped her eyes. She was deeply touched by her aunt's revelation. She clasped one of her hands and held it tight. She could understand now why she had always been so hard and unfeeling. She felt that she had been very obdurate or she'd have found her way into her aunt's mind sooner.

"You poor dear, you've had enough to make you bitter!" she said sympathetically, and rising to her feet, she stood back of her aunt's chair with both hands clasped about her neck. "I'm so glad you told me this. I can understand you better now. You've been trying to save me from a similar fate by warning me of the danger, and all this time, I've thought you were just prejudiced."

"I've lost confidence in 'em all, gal," Maria said briskly. "I wouldn't trust another man on a bet."

"Did grandpap know of this affair with Frank Gibbon?"

"Yes, Josiah knew all about the ache that Frank Gibbon left in my heart."

Deep sympathy was reflected in Josie's face. "You have surely suffered, but perhaps if you knew the truth, Mr. Gibbon has suffered, too."

"Your grandmother died soon after that," Maria went on in a tired voice. "And since then my life has been all work and sacrifice. I took care of Josiah as long as he lived, I'm glad of that. He probably died thinkin' I wasn't good to him, but I never was any hand to make over folks. If givin' my whole life to lookin' after his house and his health wasn't bein' good to him, I don't know how it's done. It don't matter much now what happens; I'm just waitin'

for the end. Of course, I'd like to see you comfortably married before I die." She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes for a moment.

"Do you ever wonder what became of Frank Gibbon, Aunt Maria?" Josie asked curiously.

"No, not any more. It took me a long time to forget him, though."

Josie's eyes were still curious. "Wasn't there some other man you could have married?" she asked impulsively.

"Humph! I've never took the second look at any man since, and I haven't had anything to do with that bunch at the clubhouse. I hate 'em all."

Josie pressed her hand. "Don't feel that way, Aunt Maria. They're not all bad, besides you can't be happy harboring hate in your heart. It destroys all that is good, and does you more harm than it does the hated one. I'm glad I decided to remain here with you. We'll have Lem farm the land, you and I will raise stock and poultry, and with what fruit we can sell off, we'll be able to make a living."

"God bless you, child!" Maria said. "I wouldn't have placed a straw in your way if you had decided to return to school, but I feel that you have made a wise decision. One don't get all of their education from books. You'll be happier right here at Sunnyridge than you would be any place else."

The rain against the window panes ceased. Josie was so deeply absorbed in her aunt's life story, she had scarcely noticed that the storm had passed. They talked over their plans for the future with perfect understanding between them.

"I don't know what makes me feel like I do, but I just feel like somethin' is goin' to happen," Maria said after a painful silence.

Josie regarded her aunt in bewilderment. "Perhaps it's because you're nervous and upset," she said, dropping to her knees again.

For the next few moments nothing was said. Josie missed her grandfather terribly, and felt acutely the loneliness of the house. She rose to her feet quickly trying to shake off the feeling, but she couldn't.

"What we need is a few hours rest and sleep, Aunt Maria," she said. "We'll wake in the morning feeling refreshed," and stooping, she kissed her aunt's forehead and climbed the stairs to bed.

CHAPTER XXIII

WHEN Mrs. Hall learned of Josie's decision to remain at home that winter, she tried in every way possible to get her to reconsider the matter; and when she saw that all persuasion was useless, she gathered together all the books she could find and took them out to Sunnyridge.

Josie greeted her with open arms and they had a long visit. Josie found it hard to convince her friend and benefactor that she was doing the right thing by giving up her school work.

"I'm all broken up over the loss of grandpap, Mrs. Hall," she said sadly. "And Aunt Maria simply couldn't live here alone."

"I know how you feel, dear," Mrs. Hall said tenderly. "Well, you can study at home, and possibly next year you'll be ready to return to school again."

Josie faced the future with fear and trembling. At times she scarcely knew what to do with herself. They were quite busy at that time, and she welcomed hard work like a dog would a biscuit. For short periods at least, it kept her mind off worry.

Fall came suddenly, almost like a thief in the night. Frost seeped into the ground, the leaves turned brown and fell, leaving the trees bare and naked.

Josie didn't go out much, her heart was too heavy. Farrel had gone to Northampton to attend Helen's wedding, and the valley didn't seem the same without him.

The Plunkett valley community received a severe shock one January day when news of Tildah Akery's death was flashed over the county. She had taken down with pneumonia and only lived three days. Maria spent the last few hours of her life with her. Her last words were: "Take care of Lem, Maria," and Maria had promised that she would.

Following the funeral, Maria sought out Lem, and said: "As long as you're goin' to farm our place you may as well stay with us, I reckon."

So Lem came to live at Sunnyridge. Josie didn't approve of the move, but she had been so shocked by his mother's sudden death, she didn't protest.

Lem took good care of the farm and stock, winning Maria's praise. The loss of his mother seemed to prey on his mind and he was despondent.

Josie, moved by sympathy for him, did everything she could to rouse his spirits. Often, after supper, she would challenge him to a game of checkers which usually served to put him in a good frame of mind. He was adept at the game, seldom allowing his opponent to reach the King Row.

Everything went well for the first few weeks of Lem's residence at Sunnyridge, then his old passion for Josie returned, and he pleaded with her to marry him. His love-making proved very annoying to Josie who never felt at ease in his presence. His actions abruptly ended the companionship which had formerly existed between them.

Living under the same roof with the girl he loved, and her indifference toward him, seemed to affect Lem's mind. He grew painfully tender toward her, and when she repulsed his advances, declaring firmly that she would never marry a man she did not love, he developed into an embittered, warped and tyrannical person. He acted queer, and was always making some remark that caused Josie and her

aunt to wonder what he had on his mind. The look in his face at times caused Josie to fear him.

"What's come over that boy?" Maria asked her one day. "He's not actin' like himself."

Josie's lip curled derisively. "I don't know, Aunt Maria," she replied. "He pesters me to death with his silly love-making. It was a mistake for him to come here to live."

Maria's face was grave. "I believe he's losin' his mind; he never seems to hear a thing that I say to him."

"He never had much of a mind to begin with, I'm afraid," Josie said with repugnance.

Farrel returned after the holidays, but Josie was afraid for him to come on the place for fear that he and Lem would have trouble.

Often, when in one of his moods, Lem would go back over to the old place and stay a few days.

"I think we should get someone in his place to help us here," Josie said to her aunt one day during one of Lem's strange absences.

"Pshaw! Lem'll settle down in time. He'll come back one of these days," Maria replied.

"Really, Aunt Maria, I don't care much what becomes of him. He's a man and should be able to look after himself. I don't see how I can bear to live in the same house with him any longer."

"I don't know of anyone else we could get right now," Maria said dryly. "I'll have a talk with Lem one of these days and tell him just what I think of him."

Josie was fond of saying she was strong as an ox and, in fact, in spite of her slenderness, she was superbly healthy. She donned overalls and did the work of a man about the place. It was hard for her at first, but before many days her muscles hardened and she grew stronger. She found the

work exhilarating, and she gloried in her strength and independence.

Lem came over one day and got his clothes. "I reckon I'll stay over at the old place now," he said. "It seems more like home there."

Josie was glad for she found him almost unbearable at times. When they needed help after that, they employed Harold Teeters.

The winter had been a long and tedious one for Josie. The books that Mrs. Hall had left with her had helped her to while away many lonesome hours, but she was anxious for warm weather to come.

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Spring came early that year in Missouri. When the dogwood trees began flaunting their creamy petals, and the redbuds their red-purple flowers, Josie's spirits soared. She resumed her study of birds. Often, rising just as the sun was peeping up over the hills, she would steal away to the woods. She knew from her observation that her tiny friends were more musical at that hour than any other time of the day, and she frequently enjoyed a real concert. She sensed that there was more to their music than one could conjecture. She observed that their mood was often expressed in their voices. That they fought and quarreled among themselves; that they experienced the same little jealousies and heartaches that people did, she was assured.

During her rambles, she often ran across Farrel and visited with him. He asked her for a date occasionally and she always accepted graciously. She knew from the way her heart behaved when she saw him that she was in love with him, though he had shown only doubtful interest in her.

Maria offered no further objections to Farrel coming to the house, and the fact that her aunt had at last come to recognize him for his real worth, pleased Josie greatly. She sensed that there was a great change in her aunt. She often sought her opinion now on the way to arrange the furniture and to do other things. Perhaps it was because she considered her more grown-up, she reflected. Then, again, she thought possibly her own actions had helped to bring about the change. Now that she understood her better, she told her everything that happened without fear of being criticized. She knew her aunt was lonely, especially since her grandfather's death, and she enjoyed exchanging confidences.

One evening when Farrel called, Maria invited him to stay for supper. Josie was so surprised she almost dropped through the floor. She was glad he accepted the invitation for she knew her aunt wouldn't have liked it if he had refused.

"What are you going to serve, Aunt Maria?" she asked, her eyes wide and curious.

"Never mind, gal," her aunt replied evasively. "Just go out and visit with Farrel till I get supper ready."

"Can't I help you?" she asked eagerly.

"No, I'm not goin' to feed him like I would a preacher," was her aunt's smiling retort.

Maria, with her fried chicken, cream gravy and hot biscuits, came in for much praise.

"A meal like this is such a treat," Farrel said earnestly. "The food is delicious."

Maria insisted upon him taking another helping of chicken, and she served the bread hot from the oven. She seemed to relax and a slow pleasure gathered in her eyes.

Farrel ate slowly, and confined his conversation to things he thought would interest them. That he was rapidly gaining favor in Maria's eyes was plainly obvious.

When the meal was over, Josie and Farrel went outside and watched the sun disappear behind the hills. Josie couldn't help thinking how Farrel had grown into their lives.

"This reminds me of an evening, long ago, when I accidentally stumbled onto you down by the river," Farrel said.

Josie laughed. She couldn't quiet the tumult rising within her. Her eyes were bright as the sunset. "It seems ages since then, doesn't it? You seemed to me then like a person from another world. You must have thought me terribly shy."

He placed a hand on her shoulder. "You were shy as a jack rabbit," he laughed. "It was all I could do to pump a word out of you."

"I'm different now, Farrel. Meeting you has done things for me," she said blushing.

He took both her hands and drew her to him. "Shall I tell you what meeting you has done for me?" he asked, his voice deep and fervent.

Before Josie had a chance to reply, Maria came walking around the house.

"I'll declare, but it's a nice evenin'," she said, seating herself on the veranda.

Josie kept thinking of Farrel long after he had gone. She couldn't help wondering what meeting her had done for him. "Was he going to declare his love for me?" she mused. Moonlight suddenly began to drench the earth, the branches of the plum tree swayed in a faint breeze, and the odor of lilac reached her nostrils. She was reluctant to go inside. She sat with her chin in her hands, dreaming, longing, throbbing with youth, far into the night.

CHAPTER XXIV

FARREL was greatly surprised one morning when Mr. Allen handed him a telegram which had been telephoned over from Hill City. It read as follows:

"Winifred and I will arrive Hill City 5:00 pm today. Meet us."

Helen.

Farrel's eyes widened. "Winifred Cole coming here!" he muttered to himself.

Winifred had been an old flame of Farrel's back in his college days, but he had not seen her for months. An occasional letter or birthday greeting from her often reached him in the mail but he had not kept up his correspondence with her.

That afternoon, he groomed himself immaculately, and jumping into his car, started for Hill City. It was one of those amazing sunshiny days when the temperature rises fast as spring rivers, and wild flowers shoot up almost quickly enough to see them growing. He took a different road from the one that he usually traveled. It was a graveled highway, winding through hills, and very steep in places. One grade in particular was so steep he was forced to shift into low gear, and the hard pull started his radiator to boiling. Once he reached the crest, there was a charming view of a rich valley below with green pastures dotted with red and white farm buildings.

As he drove along, his thoughts drifted to Josie. He was forced to admit to himself that he was in love with her. He had known casually several girls back home. In fact, he had imagined himself in love with Winifred at one time, but he had never felt the sudden certainty that Josie was the girl of all girls for him. She was young and sturdy and alive, those were the things he admired in a girl. His mother would like her, it occurred to him. "Some day soon, I shall ask her to marry me," he told himself.

An hour later, he was face to face with Helen and Winifred, who had alighted from a pullman. Winifred came elbowing toward him and slipped her hand through his arm. Helen was trailing her, anxious to greet the brother whom she had traveled such a long ways to see.

At sight of Winifred, Farrel did not experience the stir of excitement that she had at one time been able to arouse in him. Something had happened to her since he last saw her. She was prettier than he remembered her and more matured, but her face was cold, hard.

"Maybe you think this wasn't a surprise," he said, greeting them warmly.

"It's wonderful seeing you again, Farrel," Winifred said, devouring him whole with her dark eyes and flashing smile.

Winifred Cole was twenty-three, with great intelligent dark eyes, and black hair. She was dressed in blue from the slender heels of her diminutive pumps to her saucy hat perched on one side of her head. Modern in every way was the instant impression she made. That she possessed a compelling personality was plainly obvious.

Helen wore a tailored gray suit with a short jacket, and a small hat to match.

Farrel chatted with first one and then the other.

"It will sure be nice to have you girls out here for a while," he said pleasantly.

"You're just the same old dear that you always were," Winifred said, her face beaming. "A trifle older, if anything, but you don't change much."

They all three crowded into the front seat of Farrel's car, and during the ride kept up a ceaseless flow of conversation; all talking at the same time.

"Such a forsaken looking country; where are the houses?" Winifred asked. "Why do you keep yourself buried out here?" She kept tapping her slippered foot on the floor of the car, eagerly scanning the landscape.

"Forsaken?" gasped Helen. "Don't you like the country?"

"It's boresome," Winifred shrugged.

"You'll love it after you're here a few days. It's fully as lovely as New England."

The ride was pleasant, but long, as Farrel developed a flat tire and was compelled to change for the spare. Dusk approached, and the moon came up, casting a ray of silver light over the hills which brought exclamations of delight from Helen.

Winifred was quite modern in thought and action. That she believed in keeping pace with the busy world in which she lived was quite evident. She didn't expect to spend the long days in the country holding her hands and waiting for something to happen. She had brought considerable reading matter along with her.

An hour later, alone in her room at the clubhouse, Winifred walked to the dressing table and seated herself before the mirror. Seeing Farrel again had caused her old feeling for him to return. "He loved me once," she cried with sudden passion. "I will make him love me again."

Farrel and Helen were visiting together while she made ready for dinner. From the heterogeneous collection of finery she had brought along, she selected a gown of green

crepe which seemed to be designed specially for her slender type of beauty.

Mrs. Allen, very graciously, served them a late dinner and tried to make the girls feel at home.

Winifred, for the next few days, busied herself getting acquainted with Farrel all over again. That she hoped to re-establish the old relations which had existed between them during their college days was quite obvious. With her beautiful body clad in pink slacks, she lounged about the clubhouse veranda.

It was several days before Farrel and Winifred chanced to be alone together. They had walked to the timber, and Farrel was pointing out to her some of the principal points of interest; trying to make her see nature as he saw it.

"Pooh!" she scoffed. "If I didn't know you so well, Farrel, I'd think you were batty." She came closer and placed a hand on his arm, her dark eyes regarding his wonderingly. "I came out here expressly to ask you a question, and it isn't pertaining to nature, either."

Farrel looked puzzled, and seating himself on an old tree trunk, he motioned her to a seat beside him.

"Very well," he said.

She sat down and raised her eyes to his. "Surely you must know my feelings toward you, Farrel!" she said with deep emotion. "Tell me, is it all over between us?"

He gazed toward the river with a serious look in his eyes and did not reply.

Winifred lit a cigarette, puffed at it for a moment, then threw it down. "Out with it, Farrel, I can see that you have changed."

Farrel raised his eyes to her and said gravely: "I'm sorry, Winifred, but I feel that our affair, a few years back, was nothing more than puppy love."

A sad look came into her eyes. "I might have known you didn't care for me when you didn't write!" Winifred said bitterly. "All these years, I've cherished your memory in my heart, and felt that some day you'd return to me!"

"I did nothing to mislead you, Winifred," he said earnestly.

A strange light appeared in her eyes for a moment. "Tell me, Farrel, is there someone else?"

"I'm afraid there is, Winifred."

"Who?" said Winifred, her face whitening.

"A girl who lives here in these very hills," he answered.

"Do you mean to tell me that you're going to marry a country girl and settle down here?" she said, her voice flat with incredulity.

"That is precisely what I intend to do," he said firmly. "Providing this girl will be my wife."

She put up quivering hands to her face, and forced herself to speak above the collapsing sensation in her breast. "You'll change your mind. You're far too intelligent to bury yourself out here."

"I was born in this state, Winifred; it's in my blood. I'm bargaining for three hundred acres of the best land in this valley. I'm going to remain here the rest of my life."

"Do you love this girl, Farrel?" Winifred asked, with a sad look in her eyes.

"With all my heart," he confessed.

"And does she return your love?"

"That question, I am unable to answer, but I believe she does."

Winifred's cheeks were flushed. She moved closer and grasped his arm. "Are you sure this isn't just a fancy, Farrel — something that will wear off and leave you miserable? Is this girl worthy of you? Is she the type that

would make you a suitable companion throughout your life? You must think before you take such a step!"

Farrel's brow clouded. "She suits me all right, Winifred. I'm a strange person, you know. I care nothing for large cities. I love these hills. There's everything here that makes life worth living; there are birds and flowers and adventure galore," he stooped and plucked a wild flower that grew beneath his feet. "See this flower, Winifred? There is beauty and color and fragrance there, yet it bloomed out here in these woods."

Her lips puckered. "I can't see why you attach so much significance to that fact," she returned indifferently.

"Because," he went on, "it is God's work. He created everything. Did you know that this forest is as thickly populated as the city of New York?"

"With what?" she gasped.

"With inhabitants of the nature world. Listen!" and gazing overhead, he added: "Do you hear that brown-thrasher?"

Winifred showed but little interest.

"Look! See that squirrel? See how steadily he creeps about among the branches of that tree?"

"Rubbish!" exclaimed Winifred, obviously anxious to get back to the former subject again. "You and I have been friends for a long time, Farrel. I'd hate to see you make a mistake."

"Have no fear, I shall not make a mistake," he said, somewhat provoked.

"I want to see this girl," Winifred said determinedly. "I must open your eyes for you. Let me judge whether or not she's the right one for you."

"I make my own decisions," Farrel said with kindly forbearance. "However, I thank you."

The following day, Winifred quizzed Helen about Farrel's love affair. "Who is this girl that Farrel is so much in love with?" she asked.

"She's a very sweet girl, Winifred," Helen replied.

Winifred's lip curled in derision. "Sweet? eh? Is she the type of girl that you'd want your brother to marry?"

"Yes, if she suits him," Helen said quickly. "Josie is a very capable person and I'd like to see her make something of herself. You must meet her, she's lovely."

Winifred's eyes darkened dangerously. "Yes, I want to meet her and have a long talk with her," she said bitterly.

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Winifred found life in the country intolerably lonely. She complained continually of it being too quiet, of the lack of social life, so Mrs. Allen, to please her, decided to give a ball and invite everyone in the whole countryside.

Josie had learned the steps at school by dancing with the Sophomores, and when Farrel insisted upon her going to the clubhouse ball, she accepted rather reluctantly. She didn't feel that it was sinful to go since the whole neighborhood was invited.

Wearing a pink dress which matched the color in her cheeks, she shyly entered the ballroom on Farrel's arm.

The crowded room with so many strange faces filled her with awe. Soon she was introduced to Winifred Cole, but the first glance in the dark-haired girl's disconcerting gaze had left her shaken and subdued. There was no friendliness in Winifred's eyes. Helen had told her that this girl was an old sweetheart of Farrel's and for this very reason she had been eager to meet her. She looked at her appraisingly. Winifred was wearing a blue evening-gown girdled in silver, and her dark hair was carefully waved. She could see that she was good looking, attractive, and made friends easily.

"I presume that's the type of girl Farrel should marry," she thought bitterly.

For the first time in her life, Josie's young heart was torn with jealousy. An odd excitement burned in her veins, and as she danced the next number with Farrel, she glanced occasionally, without seeming to do so, at his attractive visitor.

That Winifred was deeply in love with Farrel, she had not the least doubt. She observed that she lost no opportunity to talk and exchange friendly banter with him. If Farrel was disturbed in any way by her presence, he gave no indication of it.

Josie danced again and again, with all her consciousness pivoted on Winifred Cole who sat talking with Helen. "Why doesn't Farrel dance with her more often?" she wondered. Curiously her eyes sought the place where Winifred sat, and she could feel the girl's cold, speculative eyes following her.

During a period when Josie wasn't dancing, she suddenly found herself seated beside Winifred who was quick to engage her in conversation.

"I wish to talk to you alone for a few moments," Winifred said, tugging thoughtfully at her blue beaded necklace. "Would you mind coming out on the veranda?"

A flash of real surprise crossed Josie's face. "What can she have to say to me?" she wondered. She nodded her head and followed her.

"First, I am going to ask you a point-blank question," Winifred said when they reached the far end of the veranda. "What is there between you and Farrel McIverson?"

Josie looked at her for a moment, her blue eyes scornful.

"By what right do you ask such a question?" she said curtly.

"The right of one who loves him dearly," Winifred said unwaveringly. "I have loved him for years. . . . I can see that he is infatuated with you, but I shall use every means in my power to persuade him to return East with me."

Josie was stunned. Her breath caught in her throat, she found it difficult to speak. "That is your privilege," she finally said. "But, frankly, I'm afraid he will not go."

"On your account, I presume?"

Josie's blue eyes flashed and she looked hard at the woman opposite her. "No, simply because he likes it here." She paused, heaved a deep sigh and continued: "There is nothing between Farrel and me, nothing binding. We are simply very good friends. He has been awfully kind to me and my family."

Winifred looked at her dubiously. "Farrel considers you far more than a friend," she said, raising her voice slightly. "I can understand the spell which you have cast over him since he has been here, but once he gets back home, he'll forget you in a week. It's just simply madness for him to bury his talents out in this isolated spot. His people are rich, refined and educated."

"One could hardly know Farrel and Helen as I do without realizing that," Josie said. "You can't possibly know how much their friendship has meant to me." Inwardly she was trembling; she was surprised at her own voice.

"Then if you are truly grateful, you'll give up Farrel and have nothing further to do with him."

Josie's eyes were deep with pain and yearning. Was she strong enough to give up the man she loved, no matter what the cost? "That's asking a great deal," she mumbled.

Coming closer, Winifred began talking feverishly. "Now let's get down to facts. There are, we'll say, six or seven years difference in your ages, and you've been reared in different environments. Suppose you were to get married, for

the first year or two you might imagine yourselves happy, but honestly could you measure up as Farrel's wife? Would there be any possible chance for happiness after you passed thirty? Would you be companionable, or would he become bored after a while and find you dull?"

Josie looked dazed and unbelieving. Her cheeks were hot.

"I hope you'll pardon me for saying this," Winifred went on, "but if Farrel married you he'd regret it before six months had elapsed, and you'd be an unloved wife."

Josie put her hand to her heart, for the pain there was intolerable, she stood biting her lips and staring miserably at the floor. Shaking with a tremor which she was unable to define, she said, "Let's not discuss the matter further, Miss Cole."

Winifred's dark eyes flashed. "I'm sorry if this conversation upsets you, but I'm pleading for the one I love. Farrel belongs to me! His work, his future depends upon my help!"

Josie's tongue and lips and throat were dry and burning. "Say no more, Miss Cole," she said, swept with fresh anger. "All these things you have told me, I will remember. I have no desire to cause trouble between you and Farrel." Her voice broke in spite of her, and tears welled from her eyes. "I realize that you have had advantages which I never have had, but I wouldn't care to exchange places with you. Your life has made you hard and cold, and you lack that human quality with which most country people are endowed."

Winifred looked amused, her pearl white teeth showing in a forced smile. Her voice, formerly so strong, softened fleetingly. "Promise me that you will have nothing further to do with Farrel. It will save you both pain and suffering later on."

Josie realized, with a little shock, that it was just like asking her to give up life itself. She could feel the blood rush to her cheeks as she looked into Winifred's dark eyes.

"I — I — promise," she said with a faint sinking in her heart.

Winifred looked triumphant, as if she had somehow out-talked and defeated her. "Isn't there something I can do for you?" she asked, obviously a trifle ashamed of her actions. And later with a little catch in her throat, she added: "Possibly I could get you a position in the city where you could learn to do useful things."

Josie's mouth set in firm lines. "There is nothing you can do, Miss Cole, thank you," she said grimly. "I shall remain here for the present."

Obviously assured that she had dealt the necessary blow, Winifred led the way back to the ballroom.

Josie did not follow her inside, but stood on the veranda for a moment looking down over the valley. She hated herself for coming to the ball. She wanted to get away from Farrel. She resolved that she would turn him over to Winifred and put him out of her mind forever. To get back to Sunnyridge — to her Aunt Maria, would be a relief. That was where she belonged, where she had always belonged, not in Farrel's world. Quietly she sped across the lawn. It was only a little distance and she was not afraid. A full moon had floated up like a ball of fire over the rim of the hills.

She was almost home before she realized that someone was following her.

"Josie!" said a strangely familiar voice. "What do you mean by running away like this?"

Josie started to run, she knew what would happen if she stopped. She was almost to the gate when Farrel came up behind her, caught her in his arms and turned her

around. She felt herself held very closely; felt it with every nerve in her body.

"Oh, Farrel, I couldn't stay any longer, I just couldn't!" she cried.

"What did Winifred say to you? I saw you leave the ballroom together."

"What difference does it make what she said so long as she told the truth."

"Josie, you must listen to me!" he entreated. "I love you!"

But Josie was not listening. Memory was painting for her its own picture of Winifred Cole telling her that she'd never be able to make him happy.

Before she realized what was taking place, he was smothering her with kisses.

She shoved him away, shaken with an intolerable sorrow. She must give him up. She must find the strength to do what, in the end, would prove to be best for him. He deserved something finer than a mere country girl for a wife. She felt that it would be kinder to disappoint him now than later.

"Go, Farrel!" she pointed toward the clubhouse, "back where you belong; back to the girl who loves you." He tried to interrupt her, but she wouldn't listen. "I'm sorry, but I don't want to ever see you again. I would just make you unhappy!"

"But, Josie, you're being silly!" he said, taking hold of her arm. "You're the girl I want!"

With an emptiness in her heart bleaker than any she had ever known, she broke away from him and ran into the house. She managed to undress and get into bed. She buried her burning face in a pillow, but not to sleep. Her heart was as heavy as lead. She rolled and tossed for hours, it seemed, fighting a terrible battle with herself.

The following day, she was about as miserable as it was possible for a girl to be. She felt angry at God, at the world, at herself. The pain in her heart was severe. She wrote Helen a letter explaining her abrupt departure from the ball, requesting that she and Farrel try to understand and leave her to herself. She felt that she must give them up. Winifred Cole had opened her eyes for her.

Maria, alarmed at Josie's low spirits, asked, "What happened over there last night?"

Josie decided to confide in her aunt. "I must tell someone what's on my mind or I will go insane!" She threw herself down on her knees and buried her face in her aunt's lap. "Oh, Aunt Maria, my heart is broken!"

Maria looked down at Josie with fear and trembling. "I knew this was comin', gal," she said nervously. "Didn't I warn you months ago what would happen? When a girl begins runnin' around with a bunch she don't belong with, it always ends in trouble. Young folks, it seems, have to play in the fire and get their fingers burned before they'll believe it's hot."

"Oh, Aunt Maria, you don't understand!" Josie said heartbrokenly. Then, sobbingly, she told her everything that had happened at the ball.

"Humph! That hussy talked that way to you, did she?" Maria said, drawing herself indignantly erect. "I'd like to box her ears for her. Listen, gal, you're plenty smart enough for anyone, and don't let anyone tell you any different; and unless I'm badly mistaken that McIverson feller knows it."

The next few days, Josie wandered about the old place, scarcely knowing what to do with herself. She sometimes wished that she had gone ahead and married Lem. Their farms joined, and while she couldn't have love, she would have a home of her own and a family.

CHAPTER XXV

FARREL, angry at Winifred for interfering in his affairs, persuaded Helen to take her away. He did not feel that he ever cared to see her again.

Josie's attitude was causing him considerable anxiety. The hunger of his loneliness was too much. It was unbearable, when she was so near, not to see her. An impulse started him toward Sunnyridge.

Maria met him at the door. She was as inhospitable as a jaybird on her nest. When he asked for Josie, she gave him a mean look. "Ain't you people caused her enough of trouble? She told me to say to you, if you called, that she didn't care to see you."

"There has been a misunderstanding, if I—"

She banged the door shut in the middle of his sentence.

Farrel made his way back to his lodge with a crestfallen look in his face.

His misery was further augmented the following morning when he discovered that his new motorboat which he had purchased that spring had been stolen. He called the sheriff in Hill City and reported the theft.

Three hours later, the sheriff arrived on the scene and started an investigation. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man with piercing black eyes.

"Any suspects?" he inquired of Farrel.

Farrel folded his arms and looked at the sheriff gravely. "Mr. Cowley, a fisherman, told me he saw a man prowling around the wharf late last evening. I haven't used the boat

for the past two days and don't know exactly what day it was stolen."

"Let's talk to this man Cowley, maybe he can give us a clue," the sheriff said.

They had no difficulty in locating Frank Cowley who lived in a shack down by the river. He was an elderly man with gray hair and pale blue eyes.

"It was after sundown last night that I noticed a strange man prowling around the wharf," Cowley said. "He was tall and slender and heavily bearded. He did not look up when I passed him."

While they were talking, Mr. Allen, the clubhouse proprietor, walked up and said excitedly, "I just happened to think there's a man living down the river a ways who has been acting queer lately. I was wondering if he could have stolen the boat."

"What kind of looking man is he?" Cowley inquired quickly.

"Tall and scrawny looking with a beard. He was up at the clubhouse a few days ago selling fish."

"That's the man I saw last night," Cowley said nervously.

"Ned Hoskins. He's a peculiar duck, no one seems to know very much about him. I can direct you to where he lives."

"Get in the car, men, let's look him up."

An hour later, the sheriff was interviewing Ned Hoskins who appeared to be nervous and restless. Hoskins was a tall, slender, heavily bearded man with a face like a hyena. His black hair was thin and disheveled, and there was a sneaking look in his dark brown eyes. He was sullen and denied any knowledge of the boat.

"You were seen around the wharf last night at dusk," the sheriff said.

"Not me," Hoskins said angrily. "I didn't leave the house after supper."

"Let's look around, men," the sheriff suggested.

In the timber, only a short distance from the river, they came upon an object covered with a tarpaulin.

"What have we here?" asked the sheriff.

Farrel raised the tarpaulin and his eyes fell upon his missing boat. The hot blood rushed to his cheeks. "Well, what do you think of that?" he said excitedly. "It's my boat!"

"Cover it up," the sheriff ordered. "Come, we'll go back up to the house and make Hoskins confess."

When the sheriff told Hoskins of his discovery, Hoskins stared at him wildly.

"Come, now, you may as well confess, we've got the goods on you."

After an hour's grilling, Hoskins confessed that he and Lem Akery had stolen the boat.

"It was Akery's idea," Hoskins said. "He wanted some money to get married on. We sold the boat to a man at Arlington for two hundred dollars. He was comin' after it tonight."

The man's words caused the blood to freeze in Farrel's veins. Money to get married on? Who else could Lem be marrying but Josie? It was incredible.

"Come get in the car, Hoskins!" the sheriff ordered. "You're going to Hill City. Turning to Farrel, he added: "Where can I find this man Akery?"

As far as Farrel was concerned this was one time that Lem was going to get what was coming to him.

"I can help you locate him," he said seriously. "He has a small farm just a short distance from here."

Failing to find Lem at the Akery farm, they drove to Sunnyridge where they found Maria alone.

"We're looking for Lem," Farrel explained. "Can you tell me where we can find him?"

Maria stared at him in a stunned manner. "What do you want with him?" she asked briskly.

"Franklin, the sheriff is looking for him in connection with the theft of a motorboat."

Maria choked back a scream. "Lem a thief?" she gasped.

"I'm afraid so, another man has confessed and implicated him in the theft."

The white, sharp agony of her face troubled Farrel. She appeared to be so upset she didn't know what she was doing.

"Josie married to a thief!" she muttered almost incoherently. "That's enough to make Josiah rise up in his grave."

"You don't mean to tell me that Josie and Lem are married?" Farrel gasped, grasping hold of her arm.

"They're on their way to Hill City right now to get married," Maria said. "They wanted me to go with 'em but I told 'em I'd stay here and bake the weddin' cake. Parson Willoughby is with 'em."

"On their way to get married?" Farrel said, shocked.

"It's true, sure as I'm livin'," Maria said sadly. "Josie has been blue and discouraged here lately and didn't know what to do with herself so she decided to marry Lem and get it over with."

Like a cloud shadowing the bright sunlight, a wave of desolation and cold fear closed over Farrel.

"How long have they been gone?" he asked excitedly.

"It was around eleven o'clock when they left," Maria said, glancing at the clock on the wall. "It's been two hours."

Farrel never had wanted Josie so much in all his life as he did in that moment. "We must block that wedding!" he said, hurrying to the door.

"Wait!" Maria yelled, "I'm comin' along. Josie ain't goin' to marry no thief if I can help it!"

Farrel returned to the car and explained to the sheriff briefly.

Soon, Maria came rushing out of the house garbed in a black dress with the belt hanging loose. A black straw hat trimmed in white flowers perched dizzily on top of her head.

"We ain't got no time to lose if we're goin' to stop that weddin'!" she said, gasping for breath.

Farrel helped her into the car, and crowded into the front seat beside the sheriff and Hoskins.

"Step on it, sheriff!" he said. "We must stop that wedding!" Just why Josie would take such a step was beyond him. He could scarcely believe it.

Maria, Farrel sensed, was more upset than he. She sat very erect, her eyes focused on the road ahead. He could hear her talking to herself in the back seat. The sheriff drove at a terrific rate of speed which served to augment her fears. She tapped him on the shoulder once and asked, "Ain't we about there?"

"We'll be there in fifteen minutes," the sheriff informed.

When they reached the City Hall in Hill City, Farrel leaped from the car and hurried inside. The clerk informed him that the license had been issued an hour ago. His spirits dropped. He had about given up all hopes of saving Josie from making a dreadful mistake.

"She'll likely go to Mrs. Hall's place to be married," Maria said. "She said something about it."

After making inquiries, they drove to Mrs. Hall's residence on Elm street. Every moment was sheer agony for Farrel.

Maria, followed by Farrel and the other two men, hurried into the house. They learned to their amazement that the wedding was in progress.

"Repeat after me," the parson was saying, "*I, Lem, take thee Josie . . . in sickness and in health . . .*"

"Stop this weddin', Parson!" Maria shouted before the sheriff had a chance to speak. She walked up and shoved Lem and Josie apart, her eyes blazing.

"I'm sorry to interrupt the wedding, Parson, but I have a warrant for this man's arrest," the sheriff said.

The parson gaped. Lem's eyes dropped. He offered no resistance when the sheriff took hold of his arm and led him out.

Josie looked as if she had just been rescued from a sentence of death. She was white as the lace on her frock. Tears started in her eyes and rolled down her cheeks.

Farrel held out his arms and she went to him.

"Come, Josie, I must talk to you alone," he said, leading her into the back parlor. Once they were seated on the divan, he added: "Tell me, dear, why did you do this?"

"Oh, I don't know, Farrel, I must have been insane! What did the sheriff want with Lem?"

"He and Ned Hoskins stole my motorboat and are under arrest."

Josie felt that God had intervened and saved her from a fate worse than death. "I promised Miss Cole that I would give you up, Farrel, and it didn't seem to matter what happened after that!" She sobbed and clasped her hands so tightly the knuckles whitened.

"Then you do love me, Josie?" he said fervently. "You really do?"

"More than anything, Farrel!" she gasped. "So much that I'm afraid."

He pulled her to him, half startled, half smiling, and kissed her, a long kiss in which his heart seemed to go with

it. She hid her face against his shoulder. Her whole body trembled as he gently soothed her. He touched her fair hair with his fingers, and said, "Josie, I love you very much, let's get a license and get married this very day! We can live at Ravenwood and be happy!"

Parson Willoughby entered the room at that moment, followed by Mrs. Hall and Maria.

With their hands clasped tightly together, Josie and Farrel stood up.

"I have something important to say to you people," Farrel said nervously. "With your permission there will be a wedding after all, but with a change of bridegroom. I know this will be hard for you to understand but Josie and I have been in love with each other for a long time. A certain party endeavored to cause trouble between us but I'm thankful that things have turned out like they have."

Mrs. Hall seemed to be pleased at the turn of events, Maria gazed at them thunderstruck, while the parson only smiled.

Josie's face took on a glow of happiness. She moved toward her Aunt Maria and said, "I didn't want to marry Lem! Farrel is the man I love!"

Farrel placed an arm about Josie and said, "I love her, Aunt Maria, and want to make her my wife!"

"Huh! Wel, if that's the way you feel about it, there's nobody goin' to stop you, I don't reckon. Arvilla is comin' to live with me, anyway."

An hour later, another ceremony was taking place in Mrs. Hall's living-room. When Parson Willoughby pronounced Farrel and Josie man and wife, Farrel kissed his bride and said, "Nothing can ever separate us now, dear!"

Josie slipped her arms around his neck and clung to him. She felt that with Farrel she could live the kind of life that she wanted to live; the life of a Christian.

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